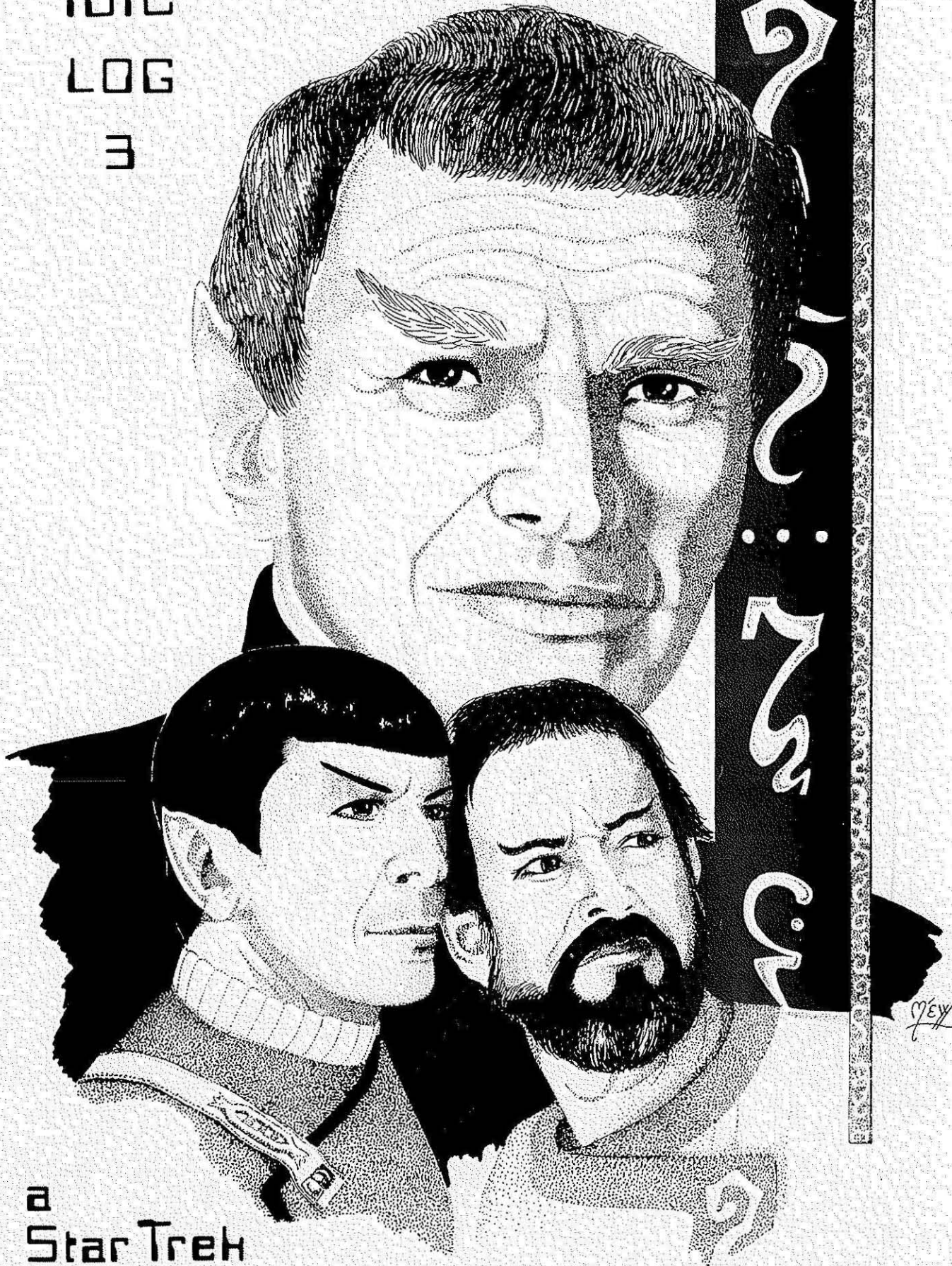


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a
Star Trek
fanzine

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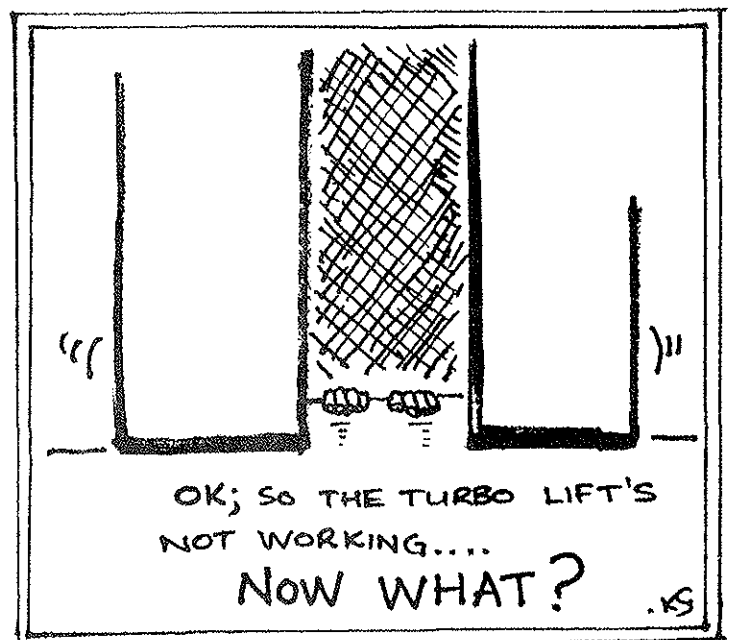
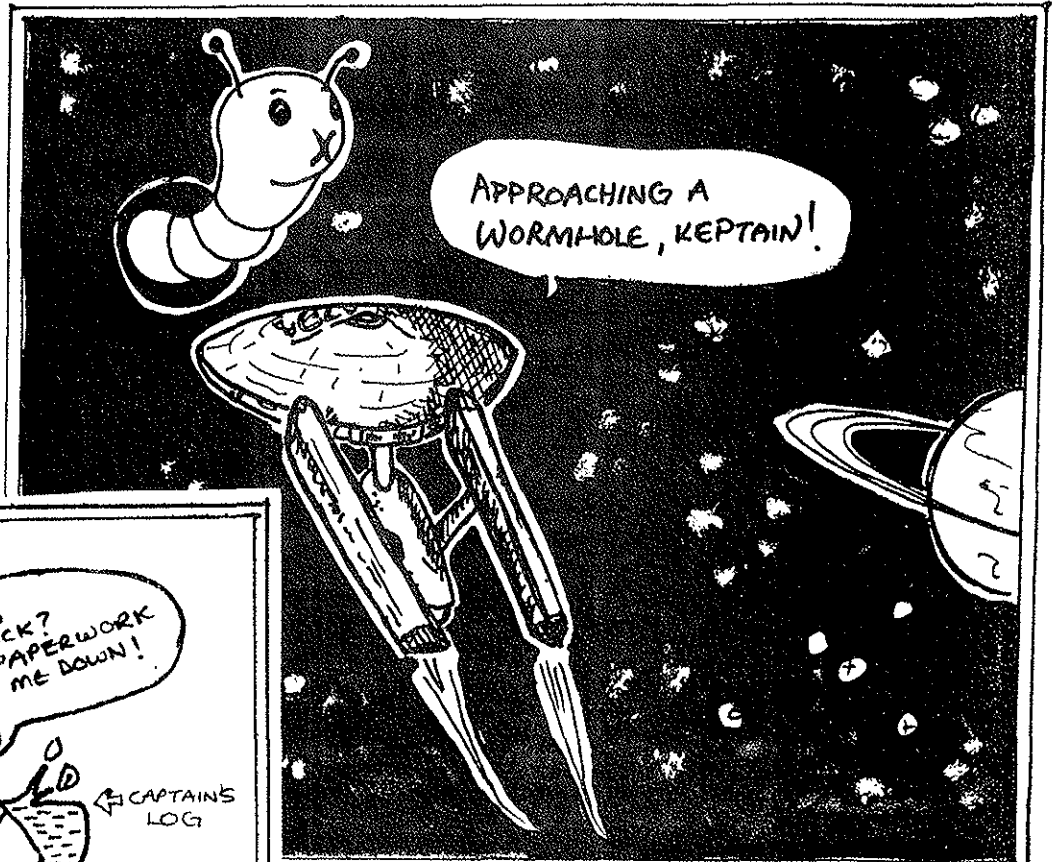
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NOT SO MEMORABLE MOMENTS FROM STAR TREK



TRIPTYCH

by

Therese Holmes

This story won the UFP 88 fiction competition

I would embrace any sacrifice for you and for those dear to you...

Flicking through the pages of the ancient book, the young officer stopped again at the words which had so often puzzled him. The sentiments were foreign to his self-contained nature; but he trusted his mother's judgement. Before he had left home in disgrace, she had come to him and pressed the book into his hands. Then, without a word, she had gone. It was the last time he was ever likely to see her.

Frequently since then he had pondered her choice of parting gift.

Sacrifice... It was a mystery to him, and he was a sworn enemy to mystery. Sighing, Spock replaced the antique copy of "The Tale of Two Cities" in his desk drawer. Some day he would figure it out. Some day he would understand Humans. And some day he would be one with them... Some day.

Just then the intercom whistled.

"Spock here."

It was Gibson, the Science Officer.

"Something's come up, Mr. Spock. Captain wants us in Briefing Room 2 in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir."

When he slipped into the Briefing Room ten minutes later, Gibson was already there along with Dr. Boyce, Security Chief Farrand and several others chatting in groups. Immediately behind Spock came the Second Officer, Mr. Shah.

"Something to get our teeth into, eh, Mr. Spock?" he said, clapping him jovially on the back.

"Sir?" said Spock.

Before Shah could reply, the doors slid open again and Captain Pike entered with Number One.

"Sit down, everybody," said Pike briskly, and they found chairs. "For those who don't know, I'll just give a brief summary of the situation, and then I'll ask Number One for her analysis."

He waited while they settled. "OK. We are currently orbiting a Class M planet which has been charted but not previously explored. Preliminary sensor sweeps reveal abundant signs of civilisation, and resources capable of supporting a large population. The problem is, of that population, there is sign zero."

Spock interpreted the ensuing silence as meaning that no-one else understood either.

"All dead?" asked Dr. Boyce at last.

"Not dead. Just not there."

Puzzled glances were exchanged around the table. Spock decided to wait for more information before venturing a comment.

"Er - Captain - " said Gibson.

"I'm afraid that's all I know, Mat. OK, Number One, the floor's yours."

With an elegant motion, Number One rose to her feet and activated the central viewer. Spock sometimes wondered if she could have been raised on Vulcan, so complete were her poise and control. Still, he reflected complacently, it had made her unpopular with the crew.

"Thera III," she was saying, indicating the viewer screen, "was logged six years ago when the Lexington charted this sector. However, they concentrated on the Nebula, and therefore we arrived with little previous knowledge of the other star systems. This particular planet, as the Captain indicated, was found to be Class M, type 1, with a probability of 90% plus of a corresponding biota. Indeed, the evidence is overwhelming that it has until very recently supported a civilisation of approximately Richter H. But..." She stopped, for once at a loss.

"Other life forms?" asked Boyce.

"None," said Pike. "Zilch. As far as we can resolve from up here, there's not a single living thing on the surface of that planet."

"War," said Gibson matter-of-factly. "Bound to be. Richter H." He shook his head. "Nasty."

"War is a possibility," said Pike. "But the only way to end the speculation is to go down and take a look. Therefore, five landing parties will beam down to these locations, and will investigate in detail their immediate area." Five points of light shone out from the slowly turning schematic globe on the viewer screen. "Number One, Mr. Shah, Mr. Gibson, Mr. Farrand and myself will lead the parties. Choose your own personnel and report back here in twenty-four hours. Any questions?... Yes, Mr. Spock?"

Spock was not aware that he had made any move, but Pike had a disconcerting way of reading him sometimes.

"I merely wished to ask Number One how recently she estimates that this event occurred?"

"From the fact that throughout our approach, and despite wide band monitoring, we have detected not the least vestige of a

broadcast signal that could have originated here, we estimate it happened not less than three standard months ago, and probably nearer six. You are familiar with the calculations, I'm sure."

Spock nodded, satisfied.

He formed one of Shah's party, together with Dr. Boyce and three security guards. They were the third party to beam down, their destination the outskirts of one of the larger cities. There, in the midst of splendour, they found desolation. Tall, elegant buildings flanked wide thoroughfares and spacious concourses. A riot of different styles and a pot-pourri of different building materials somehow blended in perfect architectural harmony. And every house was empty, every street silent, every square deserted.

Signs of previous life there were in plenty. Litter blew about on the breeze; powered vehicles stood at crazy angles, many of them totally wrecked; a doll lay abandoned in an alleyway. Spock dutifully recorded it all on his tricorder. Whatever catastrophe had overtaken these people, it had been sudden and complete. Thera III was barren and sterile; except for themselves, utterly sterile.

Somewhere in the square a door banged. The wind was freshening; Spock wondered if there would be a storm. Second Officer Shah went off in the direction of the sound. Spock watched him walk across the square, before returning his attention to what appeared to be a small clock tower. Suddenly there came a crash, a cry, a prolonged clatter, and then they were all running to the doorway Shah had just entered. They found him, lying with his neck broken, in a heap of metal and plastic that only moments before had been a staircase.

Dr. Boyce could do nothing. He stood up, shaking his head.

"How could it happen?" said a security guard.

"Well, he wasn't pushed," said another, rather unnecessarily, Spock thought.

"Obviously he was climbing the stairs when the structure collapsed," he said sharply.

"But why should it do that?" persisted the guard. "This place may be deserted, but it's not crumbling about our ears."

"Wood," said Boyce.

Spock nodded. "Exactly. The staircase must have incorporated wood in its design, which, having disappeared with every other piece of organic matter on the planet, has left the structure unstable."

He gazed down at the body, his feelings compounded of grief, anger and frustration.

"Well, Mr. Spock," said Boyce, "what do we do? I guess you're in command here now."

It was true. Though Boyce was senior to him in rank and experience, medical personnel were debarred from taking command except in the most exceptional circumstances. Spock frowned at the darkening sky, and the wind ruffled his hair as he considered his

alternatives.

"Doctor, you had better beam back to the ship with Mr. Shah's body. The rest of us will continue our investigations until beam-up time - indoors, if the storm breaks. The Captain's party is out of communicator range here, but you can notify him of Mr. Shah's death from the ship."

"Very well, Mr. Spock, if that's what you want. But don't you think you had better come back too?"

"No, Dr. Boyce, I do not."

To do so would be an unacceptable waste of a valuable research opportunity. Spock turned away as the security guards began to pull the body out from under the rubble. Turning back, he said, "It would be wise to relay a warning to the other landing parties about the wood."

Boyce nodded and Spock returned to the square, his tricorder already humming again.

Three days later, back in Briefing Room 2, they had to admit defeat.

"In conclusion," Gibson was saying, "all we can say is that every particle of organic matter on the planet appears to have been removed or annihilated by some unknown force or agency. I guess we just leave the file open and let the Federation Investigators take it from here."

"So noted," said Pike. "Anything further?"

"Yes, sir. The crew have taken to calling the planet Mary Celeste, and it does seem kind of appropriate. Do I have your authorisation to enter that in the records as an alternative name?"

"You have, Mr. Gibson."

Spock noted the slight frown on Number One's face, registering her disapproval. He himself could see no harm in the notion. It was simply another example of the Human aptitude for making illogical leaps, connections where no connection existed. It was a trait he had encountered before in his limited experience of Humans, and it was not the least baffling part of their baffling nature. Sometimes he despaired of ever becoming one.

"Well, gentlemen," Pike was saying, "I think that's all on the subject of Thera III - or Mary Celeste. One more mystery to be chalked up to the Universe. I know Mr. Spock here would like to stick around and change that, but, regretfully, we have other duties. We've been ordered to Rigel VII, where it seems some sort of civil war has broken out. Thank you, gentlemen. Dismissed."

As they stood to leave, Dr. Boyce, who had been sitting by Spock, laid a hand on his arm.

"One of my former students once made a rather perceptive comment," he said, looking hard at Spock. "He said that youth and inexperience are handicaps which cure themselves. He now has a flourishing practice in Georgia."

Boyce held him in his steady gaze for a moment longer, and then turned and left the room. Spock, astonished, was about to follow and ask his meaning, when Pike called him back. He saw that Number One had also stayed behind; and at once he sensed that the Doctor's puzzling remark was about to be made clear.

"Sit down, Spock," said Pike affably. "Now, it cannot have escaped your attention that since the death of Mr. Shah, you are the senior lieutenant aboard."

"Yes, sir."

"You mean 'No, sir'."

"Sir?"

"The Captain," interposed Number One severely, "is of the opinion, which I share, that you should succeed Mr. Shah as Second Officer."

Spock was silent. Here, then, was his explanation; but he had no arguments ready.

"Well?" prompted Pike.

"May I point out, sir, that Lieutenant-Commander Gibson would be a more obvious choice?"

"Maybe so. But he's not *my* choice."

Pike was watching him carefully, Spock noticed.

"Don't worry, he's not being passed over. The fact is, he's applied for a teaching post at the Academy, and they're not likely to turn him down. And besides, he's had no Command training."

Neither had Spock; a fact of which Pike could not very well be ignorant. He again kept silence. Number One drummed her fingers on the table.

"We are aware that you also have received only basic training in that area," she said. "Furthermore, you are young by Vulcan standards, and inexperienced by any standards. For that reason, you will be Acting Second Officer only until such time as you have completed the prescribed courses."

"As soon as we've finished on Rigel VII, you'll be sent to Officer Training School on Beta Antares IV," added Pike.

This had every appearance of having been planned. Spock saw his avenues of escape rapidly diminishing.

"Sir... "

(Sir, I am too young. It will be years before I have wisdom sufficient to assume a position of authority. Sir, it is unthinkable. I am tal farr - immature -)

STOP!/KROYKAH!

"Sir, I do not wish for command. I joined Starfleet - "

"Yes, Mister," snapped Number One. "You joined Starfleet."

"All right, Number One. Go on, Mr. Spock. Say what you have to say."

"Thank you, sir. I joined Starfleet because of its almost unparalleled scientific facilities - "

"Almost!" Number One raised an ironic eyebrow. "Why didn't you stay on Vulcan?"

"That was not possible."

"Let's not go into that now," said Pike, seeing the stiffness settle into Spock. "What you're saying, Mr. Spock, is that your loyalties are to Science and not to the Fleet."

"No, sir, indeed. They are not separate in my mind. I simply feel that I can best serve the Fleet as a scientist. I'm a good scientist."

"Mr. Spock, one thing Starfleet has no shortage of is good scientists. In fact, we have an embarrassment of them. What we need is good officer material, and some very important people think you have it in you to be just that."

Spock stared at his Captain in outright disbelief. But for the inhibiting presence of Number One, he would have laughed. The silence lengthened. Pike fiddled with a stylus. At last Number One stood up abruptly.

"Let's stop this, shall we?" she said. "The fact is, Mr. Spock, Starfleet Command wants a Vulcan, and you are the most likely candidate."

Pike threw his stylus onto the table and sat back heavily. "Thank you, Number One, very much."

So that's it, thought Spock. The game was politics, and he was the pawn, the sacrificial victim. His career, his ambitions, his hopes - mere desert dust before the wind. Command "wanted a Vulcan", because the Fleet was top-heavy with Humans and the fact had been commented on. Well...

"I am not a Vulcan," he said quietly.

Number One almost gawped at him, and Pike began to look dangerous.

"I am, at any rate, as much Human as Vulcan. Surely the facts of my parentage are known at Starfleet Command?"

"Don't play genetics with us, Mister," said Pike levelly. "You look Vulcan, you were born there. That's all Command needs."

"Anyone would think we were hounding you out of the service, Mr. Spock," said Number One, resuming her seat, "instead of offering you advancement."

Her steady gaze was frank and pleasant. No point in asking what would happen if he refused the offer.

"Of course, we don't ask you to give up everything," said Pike.

"Or even anything," said Number One with some surprise.

"Well, yes. It's not a question of changing horses in midstream - if you understand what that means. Naturally you'll stay with the Science Department - though your position as Assistant Science Officer will have to go to young Bjorling. We couldn't ask you to do both jobs!"

"On the contrary, sir - "

"No, Spock. It wouldn't do."

Pike smiled, but for once Spock couldn't find it in himself to arrange his features in an answering expression. Of course he could do both jobs! Hadn't they just told him he was Vulcan?

He rose. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock. That will be all."

He walked quickly back to his quarters, wondering if this strange non-feeling that he was experiencing was what Humans called 'numbness'. If so, then he could not expect it to last; a reaction would surely follow. Perhaps now would be a good time to revive the old control techniques, which he had done his best, over the past few years, to forget. He entered the brightly lit room and moved towards the closet where he kept his firepot, never lit within these walls.

But - he hesitated before the open door. There were other ways, *Human* ways. His mother had never had recourse to the firepot in all the years he could remember. As a Human, he should be able to rely on his own native resilience to see him through. As a scientist, he could examine the experience dispassionately; analyse, rationalise, and put it into its true perspective. Above all, he was his mother's son. OTS might make a Vulcan out of him, but *that* they could never change.

Acting Second Officer Spock picked up his firepot and hurled it across the room, where it shattered into a thousand pieces against the featureless, remorseless bulkhead.

* * * * *

"My God, Bones, what have I done...?"

We slipped out of spacedock, Excelsior in (temporary) pursuit. Ahead, space; Grissom; the Mutara sector; the Genesis planet. Behind, a crippled ship, and, very possibly, five wrecked careers.

Warp speed, and three hours to Genesis. Chekov patiently sat alternately trying to raise Grissom and monitoring the subspace channels. Occasionally, he glanced over at me and shook his head slightly. My growing concern was accurately reflected in his hunched shoulders, faint frown and set lips.

They're still so young, he and Sulu, and good officers. What are they doing here? What are any of us doing here?

Once, in this sort of situation, I could get up, go out into the ship, pace, distract my mind with a hundred shipboard details.

("... let's go mind the store... "

"... Scotty, you're fired... "

"... in Sickbay, with a headache... "

"... Somebody help the Captain!... ")

I couldn't very well pace here, on the bridge. It would have annoyed the crew - my motley crew of hijackers. I couldn't even go to my quarters. Everything below the bridge was sealed and bare, ready for decommissioning.

I glanced at Scotty, and he smiled encouragingly.

All I could do was sit and wait and watch.

Scotty made some technical remark to Sulu, who, calm and efficient as ever, replied in the same language. If I ignored the non-regulation clothing, then it was almost, for a moment, possible to believe ourselves back, years back, and the ship below and around me full and humming, buzzing, living...

But how could I ignore that disturbing presence at the library computer station? McCoy (Spock?) turned from the viewer, his face still somehow ghastly from the reflected blue light.

"Sensors indicate three alien ships closing on the starboard bow."

"Shields up. On screen, Sulu."

The viewer showed three oddly arranged but graceful ships speeding towards us.

"Ever seen anything like that - anybody?"

Nobody answered. Then came that deep, familiar voice again.

"Nothing in ship's records, Admiral," reported McCoy. "A previously unencountered type."

"Heading?"

"302 mark 7," said Sulu. "They should pass right in front of our nose."

"Try and raise them, Chekov."

"Aye, sir."

All my instincts urged me to follow and investigate. New life, new civilisations... But that was all over now. And to do so would be to lose precious time.

"No response, sir."

I shook my head.

"Keep trying. Bones, keep track of them as long as you can, and meanwhile send everything we're getting back to Starfleet. Might as well do what we can, while we can."

"Agreed."

The strange Spock/McCoy turned back to his board, and after a moment's hesitation began deftly to punch buttons. It was uncanny to watch him, even more so to hear him. Sometimes, that voice...

("... I do want to go back to the ship... "

"... It has to do with... biology... "

"... I have been and always shall be... "

"... Jim... help me... ")

"Status, Scotty."

"All systems normal. She's flying like a bonny bird. And to think they would be scrapping her!"

"Anything from Grissom, Chekov?"

"Nothing, Admiral."

Strange and disquieting, but all of a piece with the events of the last few days. I'd given up trying to make sense of it all. No doubt Esteban had his reasons for remaining silent. And Saavik too. And David.

David.

My son.

("'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.'
Message, Spock?"

"None that I am aware of, Admiral. Except - 'Happy Birthday.'"

But -

'... there is a man who would give up his life to keep a life that you love beside you... '

Message, Spock?)

The ground beneath our feet shifts again, menacingly. All around in the grey air, uneasy, unnatural shapes loom. This new, red, tortured world groans and roars in its death agony. And above us... Above us...

"My God, Bones, what have I done...?"

"Anything from Grissom, Chekov?"

"Nothing, Admiral."

Strange and disquieting.

"ETA to Genesis, Sulu?"

"1.2 hours, present speed."

"Still no pursuit, Bones?"

"Negative, Jim."

No, that jarred. I turned to look at him. He sat, frowning at his hands as though wondering what their function could possibly be.

I got up and went over to him.

"Okay, Bones?"

He nodded uncertainly and returned his attention to the viewer. I hovered for a moment, but he seemed composed again so I drifted on round the bridge, pausing by each post, manned or not. The layout was altered, but that didn't stop the memories.

("... hailing frequencies open, sir... "

"... I'll take you home again, Kathleen... "

"... Phasers locked on target... "

"... Course plotted and laid in, sir... ")

Chekov looked round at me, obviously unsure whether he should break into my reverie.

"Yes, Commander?"

"Still no word from Grissom, Admiral. But I am picking up Starfleet's reaction to the alien ships. They're tracking them, and sir, it looks as though they're heading towards Mary Celeste."

Mary Celeste. I'd heard Spock talk about that strange, deserted planet. It was officially classed as a mystery, and mysteries were an affront to him. For a moment, I imagined...

(The pause - the brief, shared glance - the decision...

"Mr. Chekov, lay in a course for Mary Celeste... ")

I sighed.

"Acknowledged, Mr. Chekov. Keep monitoring. Scotty, any more speed?"

"Sir, if you wanted her in pieces, you could have left her at the yards."

Fair enough. So back to the centre seat to sit and wait and watch.

An hour out from Genesis. And what is Genesis? New beginnings; life out of lifelessness. That's what Carol and David had seen, and fought for.

(... I'm Doctor Marcus!... "

"... That's David?... "

"... you show me a son who'd be willing to help... "

"... can I cook, or can I cook?... ")

Universal Armageddon was McCoy's verdict. At the very least, it had got off to a shaky start.

An hour out.

Half an hour.

"We are secured from warp speed. Now entering the Mutara sector. Genesis approaching."

"Sir - "

"What is it, Commander?"

"I'd swear something was there, sir... "

"Klingon fighter, sir!"

Klingons?

"Who *I* am is not important, Admiral. That I have *them* is."

Who... Saavik?

"A Vulcan scientist of your acquaintance."

Spock...

"Hello, sir. It's David."

David!

"David... What went wrong?"

("... I'm Doctor Marcus!... ")

"Genesis doesn't work! I can't believe they'll kill us for it - "

I can.

"Admiral, David - "

I know.

"David is dead."

"Computer, this is Admiral James T. Kirk. Request security access... "

The ground beneath our feet shifts again, menacingly. All around in the grey air, uneasy, unnatural shapes loom. This new, red, tortured world groans and roars in its death agony. And above us, a brave new star dies.

"My God, Bones, what have I done...? "

* * * * *

A cup of coffee materialised out of the plain, grey bulkhead. Surgeon-General McCoy took it and sipped.

"Damn," he muttered. "Will they ever get it right?"

He wandered across the crowded rec room towards an empty table. Sitting down to wait for his wife, he gazed round the room, so much bigger than the one he remembered.

But of course, everything has to be bigger these days. Bigger and better. And especially Enterprise - what are we on now? Four? Just look at this fairground!

They were in orbit around T'atouche, and the crew was in the middle of R & R - hence the fairground atmosphere. McCoy pursed his lips as, not for the first time, it occurred to him that Starfleet these days was being run by a bunch of kids. And sentimental kids at that.

They can get you from Earth to Andromeda in five minutes, but they can't have a Fleet without an Enterprise. He took another sip and grimaced. And they can fix a drink out of sub-atomic particles and antimatter, but they can't make it taste like coffee.

"Glad to see you still appreciate the cuisine, Dad."

A trim middle-aged woman had arrived with a tray, and she sat down beside him.

"Hi, Jo." He pushed the cup away. "Perhaps it'll taste better when it's cold."

"I wouldn't count on it."

"Where's Birgit?"

"Don't worry, she'll be along. But *somebody* has to take care of the arrangements for this afternoon."

"Don't remind me."

"Honestly, Dad. The T'atousians are doing you a great honour."

"I know, I know. But do they have to drag me half way across the Galaxy to do it?"

"You're so crabby these days. Just because you're retiring - "

"*Being* retired, and thank you for reminding me about *that*. You're really on form today, Jo."

The two Doctors McCoy glared at each other across the table, family relationship written in their blue eyes. They were observed from across the room by a small blonde woman, in her late thirties and very pregnant, whose entrance had gone unnoticed by them. She headed over to their table.

"Well, well," she said, sitting down beside her husband. "So the battling McCoy's are at it again. Who started it this time? Never mind, I haven't time. Listen, Len, can you be ready in an hour?"

"Are you kidding? I'm ready now!"

"Fine - "

"Dad! You can't go like that!"

McCoy looked dangerous, but Birgit waved a hand impatiently. "Don't worry about that now. The important thing is, they want you there for the rehearsal."

"OK, if that's what they want. But I give you fair warning, both of you, that no power in the universe will get me inside a dress uniform for this shindig."

"That's my father," said Jo. "Gracious to the core. Do you have to work at it, Doctor, or is it congenital?"

"You come just as you like, dear," said Birgit soothingly. "This is your day."

"Well, I'm glad *somebody* around here appreciates that," growled McCoy.

"How's the coffee now?" said Jo, grinning.

McCoy took a swig and a surprised look came over his face. "Better. It really is. It tastes almost like... like... "

"Coffee?"

"Well, no... But it's quite nice."

They laughed, but the younger Dr. McCoy was still worried. Her father was getting quite unreasonably touchy about his impending retirement, and she was afraid he might say something rude to the T'atousians, who were marking the event by naming a new medical complex in his honour.

"What are your plans for the future, Birgit?" she said, but her attempt to bypass McCoy failed dismally.

"What future?" he growled.

"Pardon me," said Birgit. "Jo is naturally interested in the impending birth of our child, and I must say I'm a little excited about it myself. But you, you talk as though your life were about to end."

"Well, isn't it?" He glared into his coffee. "Mandatory retirement at eighty! Most ridiculous thing I ever heard in my life!"

"Just be grateful they raised the limit from seventy-five a few years back," said Jo, "otherwise you'd be on the scrap-heap already."

McCoy glared at his daughter.

"You could use a little tact, Doctor."

"It doesn't run in my family, Doctor."

There was a strained pause, and then McCoy smiled and nodded. "You're right. It doesn't."

Jo grinned back. "I know how you must feel, Dad, really."

"Of course she does, Len," said Birgit. "We all do. You feel there's plenty of worth left in you, so why do they want to let you

go now, instead of wringing out every last drop?" She patted his arm. "The point is, you've earned this. *Earned it.* It's no sacrifice

"That's what I keep telling myself," said McCoy. "But the message hasn't got through yet. It's no sacrifice. We all have to move over, make way for the kids coming up from below. I *know* that, but I don't *feel* it."

"Spock says old age is a blessing," said Jo.

"Spock would."

The conversation was interrupted by the calm, precise tones of the computer, issuing politely from the table speaker.

"Dr. McCoy, please report to sickbay. Thank you."

Jo shoved aside her plate and stood up. "Wonder who's cut their finger now? Whatever it is, I'll get away for this afternoon, Dad, don't worry."

McCoy shook his head as she walked away. "It'll mean double shifts later."

"No. Captain Egremont has given her special leave to go, and several shore leave parties are going too. In fact, I hear there's been quite a rush for places."

"Hmmm... "

McCoy fiddled with his empty cup. "I s'pose... if there's going to be a crowd... I'd better freshen up some?"

Birgit ran a finger over his chin.

"A shave wouldn't come amiss either. Have you run out of beard repressor?"

"No, but it doesn't seem to work any more. I put some on when we arrived at this godforsaken place." He stood and helped her up.

"Well, Len," she said, "it is only the thirty hour type, and we *did* enter orbit around this 'godforsaken planet' three days ago."

The T'atousians' new McCoy Medical Complex stood in lush green parkland, the mainly wooden buildings artfully integrated into the scenery. Shady groves, tinkling streams, limpid fish ponds and sunlit glades strewn with flowers everywhere met the eye. The McCoy's had been shown round officially on their first arrival at the planet, but after the rehearsal they decided to go for another stroll round the grounds.

They climbed a low wooded hill, and stopped to sit beside a small waterfall at a point giving wonderful views over the whole park complex. As McCoy sighed contentedly, the ribbons on his dress uniform glinted in the sunlight.

"You know," he said after a long silence, "I think we could settle down here. Give up the Service - well, they're letting me go, anyway. But I could go back into civilian practice. What do you think?"

Birgit was staring into the distance, only half listening.

"Mmm. But you'd have to give up everything. Earth... your home..."

"Name one thing Earth has that this place hasn't. There's no McCoy Medical Complex on *Earth*."

Birgit shifted uncomfortably on the wooden bench. "Whatever you say, Len. Right now, anywhere with a decent maternity unit would suit me fine."

It took McCoy a moment to understand. "Oh, Birgit. When did it start?"

"A little while ago. But it seems to be gathering momentum faster than I expected."

"OK. There's nothing to worry about. Breathe deeply, and try and time the contractions."

"Yes, Doctor. But I don't have a watch."

"There appears to be a small clock tower down there - but it's too far away, and anyway it's in T'atousian. Never mind. If I remember rightly, it's not too far from here to the maternity building. Now then, gently does it - that's right."

One arm round her waist, he guided her back down the hill, trying to gauge, from her face and the tension in her body, the length and frequency of the contractions. What he saw didn't reassure him. It was coming too quickly - and several weeks too early. Well, if the worst came to the worst, he could deliver it himself, there in the wood. After all, as he had occasionally been heard to remark, he was a doctor.

In the event, they made it in time, thanks to one of the many skimmers provided for those who needed to get about the grounds quickly. The birth was an easy one, McCoy giving moral support, but no medical intervention being required. Since it had not been possible to cancel the opening ceremony, the grand speeches had had to proceed without the principal guest: but before the last word was said, McCoy was able to slip along and announce the birth of his son. As one of the T'atousian dignitaries remarked, there could be no better way of inaugurating the McCoy Medical Complex than by having a McCoy born in it during the inauguration.

Birgit stayed in the hospital overnight, but she wouldn't hear of McCoy staying with her, knowing that a private retirement party had been organised for him on board the Enterprise.

"You've already failed to make one appointment today," she said. "Don't make a habit of it. Besides, now you have a double reason to celebrate."

So he beamed back to the ship with Joanna, who, a grandmother herself, had been delighted with her tiny new half-brother.

That evening it was champagne all round in the rec room, which no doubt accounted for all the back slapping and hearty hilarity. After proposing a toast to the whole family, Captain Egremont came

over to where McCoy was trying to persuade the dispenser to materialise him a mint julep.

"Never could stand those bubbles," was his explanation.

"Well, Len, a good day's work, eh?"

"You bet. Would you believe, it's fifty-five years since this last happened to me?"

"And you don't retire every day, either. OK, OK, don't look like that."

McCoy picked up the tumbler of yellow liquid which had appeared out of the wall, and shook it dubiously.

"Oh, what the hell. It's tomorrow, and I'm officially retired. But I can still father a kid, and that's all that matters tonight."

"Sure thing, Len."

Egremont paused awkwardly, searching for a less contentious subject.

"It must have been nice for you, to see T'atouche again. Has Birgit been here before?"

"No. And I wish she could have seen as I first did, because - my god, how it's changed, Jake! It's really beautiful. I can hardly believe... " He shook his head.

"Do you know," said Egremont, "its official alternative name is still Mary Celeste?"

"That's Humans for you," said McCoy. "Go where you like in the Universe, Earth is still the centre, and all starlanes lead there. Still, if the T'atousians don't mind - oh, hello, Fred."

Earth's Ambassador to T'atouche, an old friend of McCoy's, joined them.

"Why should they mind?" he said. "It doesn't mean anything to them."

McCoy beamed at him benignly.

"I didn't see you in the crowd. Can't imagine how. You must be a hundred pounds heavier than when I saw you last. You know Captain Egremont, don't you?"

"Of course. Good to see you again, Jake. No, what always amazes me is that they consented to join the Federation at all. You must have really impressed them, Len."

"Huh?"

"Well, we know you did; we have a new Medical Centre to prove it. But you must have done some pretty slick talking to persuade them to join forces with what anybody else would have regarded as a bunch of opportunist invaders. Why, we had all but colonised the place by the time they turned up again!"

"Ah," said Egremont, "but we got out again quick enough when they did turn up, despite their absurd story."

"I didn't think it was absurd," said McCoy. "I always said - "

"Admitted, we got out," said Fred, "and left them to face a cocktail of alien biota which would have wiped them out in a month if we hadn't considerately come to their aid."

"Give them the plague, cure them of it, and they can't help but be grateful," said McCoy, nodding. "It's an old ploy."

"Surely you don't believe that, Len," protested Egremont. "How could we know they'd come back? And then - "

"I know, I know. In fact, I think we came out of it pretty well. We made the best of an awkward situation, and it's not often we can honestly say that."

"And a lot of the credit must go to you, as head of the medical team."

"Yes, it was a team. A team of fifty-three, plus I don't know how many support staff. So I don't know what makes you think I had anything to do with persuading them to join the Federation."

"Point taken," said Fred.

McCoy mused as he sipped his yellow mint julep.

"I think they took to me because I was the only one who never laughed at their story. A transporter accident never struck me as ridiculous."

Fred and Egremont looked at each other.

"Some accident!"

"Some transporter!"

They both laughed.

"There you go again," said McCoy. "What is so funny about it? I had nightmares for months after I first heard about it."

"It beats me how you were ever allowed into Starfleet," said Fred, still laughing.

"Must have been my charm and good looks, I guess."

"But honestly, Len," said Egremont, "there is something farcical about it. An experimental transporter which suddenly and without warning rips every living thing from the surface of the planet and hurls them parsecs across space to - "

" - to the no small surprise of the T'atousians, and the inhabitants of the planet on the receiving end," finished Fred. "The location of which, by the way, the T'atousians still steadfastly refuse to divulge."

"Do they, still?" said Egremont. "I didn't know that."

McCoy tilted his head to one side.

"No," he said. "When I consider that barely 10% of the population materialised on that planet; that the rest, mercifully, never materialised at all; that half the survivors died before they finished building the ships to get back in; and that nearly half of those who *did* start back never made it; no, somehow I can't find it in me to laugh. And I'm surprised at you, Fred, that you can."

"Those aren't official statistics," said Fred. "Where did you get them?"

"Never mind where I got them. They're true. And I'll tell you something else that's true. Far from persuading them to join the Federation, I discouraged it. There."

"But why?" said Egremont, surprised.

"Because - well, this is the Mutara sector - it wasn't that long after the whole Genesis business. I guess I still wasn't quite myself."

In fact, he never *had* felt quite the same after that particular experience, but he'd never admitted it to anyone except Birgit.

"But now? You've changed your mind now?"

"Have I? I guess so."

He swirled the remains of his drink around in his glass, but thought better of tossing it back. He put it down instead on a nearby table.

"Listen, guys, it's been a long day, one way and another, and I've got to start getting some sleep in before the two-hourly feeds begin. I'll see you tomorrow, OK?"

"OK. 'Night, Len."

McCoy wandered down the darkened corridors to his quarters, wondering if he would have done better to insist on a drink that was at least green. The room, when he reached it, seemed too large, too quiet, and empty. It was some time since he'd slept alone.

He pondered briefly on the T'atousian business again. Dammit, it *wasn't* funny!... was it? Sometimes he couldn't tell what was funny and what wasn't any more. Sometimes he wondered just what the Vulcan Masters had done to him on Mount Seleya. And sometimes all that seemed to have happened to another person entirely... Sometimes.

He sighed and sat down on the bed. A long ago sacrifice of something so intangible that he still wasn't sure what - if anything - he had lost, surely couldn't disturb him now. If taking on the katra had cost him anything, it had also gained him a great deal. He had come out of it different. Not more, not less; just different. And he had long known that, though it had been initiated without his consent, he would have made the same sacrifice willingly, if asked. It had been worth it, and he had no regrets.

Absently, he reached out and picked up the worn old book that had long been one of his most treasured possessions. Flicking through the pages, he stopped again at the words which had never

puzzled him.

"... For you, and for any dear to you, I would do anything..."

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YEARNING

Hot dusty air, fierce heat,
The smell of the desert shakes my soul.
Am I really home?
And am I welcome, now
After all these lonely years?
I was T'Kaul'ama;
Outcast.
"Go!" they said. "Never return."
And so I went, deeming the price worth paying.
Wait! Darkness falls - where is the sun?
Gone into limbo, taking the desert with it.
I do but dream, heartsore.

Oriel Cooper

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FAREWELL

"Live Long and Prosper" the Vulcan said
"You were always and ever my friend."
Why did you say these things at the last
When my life came to an end?
You were the one who died, bond-brother,
You were the one to leave;
You are the one who is gone, T'hy'la,
And all I can do is grieve.

Carolynn E. Taylor

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TO HOLD A DREAM

by

Patricia de Voss

Two lone figures stood on an unknown street corner and looked up at the giant HOLLYWOOD sign on the side of the hill.

"Hikaru, maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

"What else could we do? There wasn't time to get help."

"I just wish I hadn't drunk so much last night."

"Come on, Pavel, we have to find out why those Klingons think they can destroy the Federation from *this* time."

Chekov walked over to a low brick wall and sat down. He was definitely not feeling well. *It wouldn't be half so bad*, he decided, *if the sun didn't shine so brightly*. He looked up to see Sulu eager to go somewhere, and said, "Just where are we going to start? We have no idea where, or when for that matter, we are."

It was at that moment they heard someone calling to them. Sulu turned to face the approaching young man. He was about the Helmsman's age, and had just alighted from a red vehicle.

"You look lost. Can I help you?"

"Thank you. We're tourists out for a morning stroll," Sulu answered, hoping to sound convincing.

"Well, tourist you may be, but if I'm right you're a *long* way from home, Lieutenant. My wife and I saw you both transport. Now if you were on board your own ship you would have worn native costume. So I'm assuming that you are in some kind of trouble. I'm Lee Winer. Please allow me to help."

Sulu was too stunned to utter a reply for some moments. A situation like this had never been covered at the Academy, and he was unsure of what to do.

"I don't understand. How could you know who we are?"

"It's a long story, one that cannot be told standing on a street corner. Trust me. I only want to help."

"For the moment it seems we have no choice."

Chekov pulled Sulu over to one side, and - he hoped - out of range of their new friends' hearing. "Are you crazy?"

"Well, have you any better ideas? I'm also very interested in how they know so much about us."

"We shouldn't get involved with anyone from this time."

Sulu didn't like pulling rank, especially on a friend. Yet

something within him wanted to believe these people. Instinctively, he knew they could be trusted, but trying to persuade Chekov was not proving easy. "Let's put it this way. I outrank you; so let's get out of here."

"Yes, sir." Chekov stormed off in the direction of the waiting car.

Lee saw the looks on both their faces. Chekov walked past him without saying a word; this prompted Lee to ask Sulu what was wrong.

"I had to pull rank. I'm afraid he doesn't trust you."

"And yourself?"

"For now you have my undivided attention."

During the drive they got to know each other. Even Chekov started to talk to them, some of his earlier fears disappearing. Yet in that time, their helpers never told them how they knew who they were.

What was more amazing was the fact that the people they passed on the way up to their new friends' apartment didn't seem to notice them - that was until, as they reached the door, a neighbour came out of her house.

"Hi, Jan, Lee." Then she spotted Sulu and Chekov, and added, "If that's a sample of your average Trekker, I think I'll join."

"Take it easy, Sue. They're just visiting."

Sue did not take the hint. Where men were concerned she considered them all her private property. Going over to Chekov, she said, "Any time you want to play *Hunt the Klingons*, just let me know."

"You know they are here?" Chekov asked in rather a surprised tone.

Sulu hit him in the ribs.

"Oh, he's cute! Sure I can't come in?"

"Maybe later. Weren't you going somewhere?" Jan's voice was sweetly acid.

Sue walked off, still smiling; Chekov rubbed the side where Sulu had hit him.

Lee opened the door before anything else happened. It was then that Chekov and Sulu got the biggest surprise of their lives. For sitting in the middle of the coffee table was a model of the Enterprise! Looking further around the room they saw pictures of themselves and their senior officers.

Lee was the first to speak.

"It comes from a television show called Star Trek. When we saw you today we couldn't believe that all this could be true... but we're very glad that it is."

"Would you like a drink?" Jan asked.

"No, thanks," Sulu said, adding, "I think Pavel could do with something for his head, though. We just came off shore leave and some of us drank too much."

If Sulu showed little pity for his ailing friend, Jan sympathised. "Poor Pavel. How about an old twentieth century hangover cure?"

"It couldn't be any worse than what Dr. McCoy comes up with," he said as he followed her into the next room.

For the rest of the day, Lee, Jan and Sulu talked; Chekov slept. If they were to be stuck here, at least they now had friends. Friends who were quite surprised to hear that there were real Klingon spies sent here to destroy the very Federation that Lee and Jan dreamed about.

"What I don't understand, though, is why now?" Sulu asked. "Even the Klingons know the date when the Federation was formed."

"Where did the idea originally come from?" Jan asked.

Sulu didn't answer. For the first time he realised he had never given it much thought. The Federation had always been there for him, he had known no other existence. As for schooling, all that was required was to know the date it was formed, not where the idea came from.

"I think you got him on that one. How about this for a theory? Suppose there was a TV show that so captured a people's hope for the future that they kept that dream alive till the moment was right."

"But the actors and actresses! How do you explain that they all look like us?"

"My friend, sometimes it is better not to know."

"It sounds just weird enough to be true. We still have to find out what the Klingons are up to, though, and I'm really not sure how to go about that."

"The best place to start would be the studio where the show is made," Jan suggested.

"Any good suggestions on how that is going to be done? I'm sure they don't let just anyone in," Sulu asked.

"They don't. But you're not just anybody. You are George Takei, one of the stars of the show."

"Lee, you're kidding! You're going to pass them off as those actors?"

"Can you suggest a better way of finding out what is going on?"

"I guess not."

"I'll go ring up Paul and see if Koenig and Takei will be on the set tomorrow," Lee said as she walked over to the phone.

"Who's Paul?" Sulu asked.

"A friend of ours who works on the set. Don't worry, he'll be just as excited and willing to help as we are."

The next morning, the four sat in the car just outside the studio.

"This isn't going to work," Chekov uttered from the rear of the car.

"Just remember that your name is Walter Koenig."

"I certainly hope nothing has changed since last night," Jan muttered.

"Paul would have told us if it had," Lee reassured them. "Now come on and let's get going before Pavel loses his nerve."

As Lee had expected, they had no trouble getting through the gates, although finding the right set proved to be difficult, especially as they couldn't just go up to someone and ask. Finally, Fate helped them as they spotted a fake Klingon and followed him. However, upon their entry to the sound stage, Fate decided to desert them.

"George, Walter! Sorry for calling you in on your day off, but they had a fire in the lab last night and all of yesterday's work was destroyed. We're going to have to reshoot the whole thing over again."

Sulu and Chekov stood in stunned silence. Lee looked at Paul as he came over. The director talked on.

"You guys must have really flown to get here so quick! Listen, get over to wardrobe as soon as you can so we can get started."

After he had left Paul walked up to them. "Before you say anything, I tried ringing you this morning but you must have left. I only just found out about all this myself. Come on - I'll show you down to wardrobe before someone starts asking questions."

"You can't expect us to cover for them! We're not actors!"

"Who said you had to act? From what Lee has told me, just be yourselves."

Jan, Lee and Paul were standing in a corner watching Pavel go through his scenes when Jan heard someone talking behind her. The person in question was standing just at the back of the room, and had been talking to the person next to him. She didn't take much notice of what they were saying till she caught the last sentence.

"It is disgusting. A Klingon woman would never let herself be touched by an Earther like that."

Leaning over, she told Sulu and Lee what she had just heard. The two men in question were heading out the door when Lee and Sulu spotted them.

"Jan, stay here and get Pavel when he's finished. Tell him what's going on. We'll catch up with you later."

"Please - be careful!"

Lee and Sulu followed them outside and into the streets of the many different sets.

"This is hopeless. I wish I had a tricorder," Sulu muttered when they had lost sight of them on the last set.

Then they heard a voice from behind them. "That won't be necessary, Earthier. I don't know how you managed to track us down, but you won't live long enough to tell anyone."

"Then you won't mind telling me how you intend to destroy the Federation from *this* point in history."

"Oh, we don't *intend* to destroy it. We already have destroyed it by stopping the idea from forming. Now that the show has been cancelled it will soon fade into television history - in ten years hardly anyone will remember it ever existed."

"It will never fade!" yelled Lee.

"Lee, be careful. His disrupter is probably set on kill."

"You know, I don't think I will kill you now. I think leaving you here, in a world where you don't belong, remembering a future that no longer exists, would be suitable enough punishment for your interference in our affairs."

The Klingon pulled out his communicator and ordered beamup. "Goodbye, Lieutenant. Give my regards to Captain Kirk... if you can!"

Jan and Chekov arrived just in time to see the transporter effect take the Klingon spies away.

"What are we going to do now?"

"For a start, I'd say get out of here before the real Koenig and Takei show up," Lee suggested.

They drove back to the apartment in silence. Sulu and Chekov looked into the darkening night sky, thoughts of their friends and their world filling their minds. They stopped on the way and got some take-away food, but no-one was very hungry. The two visitors excused themselves early, and went to the spare room they had been using. Tomorrow they would have to think of ways to survive here; tonight they just wanted to sleep and forget their failure.

It was just after ten when they emerged from the sanctuary of the room to face the day and an uncertain future. Jan had gone out shopping, leaving Lee to look after them. Handing them each a mug of coffee, he asked if they had come up with anything.

"We'll have to go somewhere people won't mistake us for those actors."

"How about Russia?" Chekov added with a gleam.

"Pavel, I don't really think that is such a good idea at this point in history," Lee told him. "I was thinking more along the lines of Australia. It has a good climate and if you went out to some of the small towns where they rarely see television you would stand a good chance. The only problem is getting some passports and proof of Australian citizenship."

"That should be easy enough," Sulu said confidently. "All we need do is get into their computer system."

"And how are we going to do that?"

"Lee, is there an Australian Embassy here?"

"Sure, I can take you there this afternoon."

"Good. We can have a look around then go back later at night for a private visit. It will give Pavel a chance to put all that good computer knowledge Spock has been giving him to good use."

Downstairs, Jan was trying to juggle the groceries in one hand while she attempted to lock the car with the other. When she saw who was coming towards her, she nearly dropped the lot.

"They found me at the studio," Paul explained.

Kirk took one bag from her as she shut the boot while Paul grabbed the other.

"I swear if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't have believed it," Paul told Jan as they waited for the lift. "I'm sure the guard at the gate thinks he is having a nervous breakdown - he keeps seeing doubles. Poor guy - I feel kind of sorry for him."

The lift doors closed behind them and it took its unusual passengers up to the fifth floor.

Lee, Sulu and Chekov were discussing the plans for breaking in to the Australian Embassy when Jan walked in.

"Have I got a surprise for you," she said as she held the door open to admit Paul - and Kirk and Spock.

"Captain! How did you find us?" Sulu asked, surprised.

"We ran into some rather surprised Klingons. They were quite willing to tell us everything... once they realised they weren't going to get away otherwise."

"Then the Federation still exists! We thought they had destroyed it."

"In fact, it was the Klingons themselves that started the whole idea, by getting the show cancelled. Something about it - it was the show that wouldn't die. A most remarkable piece of Human foresight."

Sulu gave a brief report on how they had found out about the Klingon plot. Then he asked a favour. Since Lee, Jan and Paul

already knew what the future looked like, it couldn't hurt much to let them see the real Enterprise; to let them get into space ahead of their own dreams.

Kirk took it as a reasonable request and granted permission. Jan ran off to grab her camera. People would one day look at the photos and say what good pictures she had managed to take of the Star Trek cast and set; only they would know how real the photos actually were.

Sulu and Chekov were back at their posts and the Enterprise was on course for her next destination. Spock was busy working on something at the Science station; when he finished he turned to face Sulu.

"I have that information you requested, Lieutenant."

Kirk and Chekov turned with Sulu to listen.

"One of the chairmen on the first Federation Council was a Steven Brooks, and another co-worker was Sandra King. They were both direct descendants of Lee and Jan Winer and Paul and Eileen Clegg. It would seem that they did not forget."

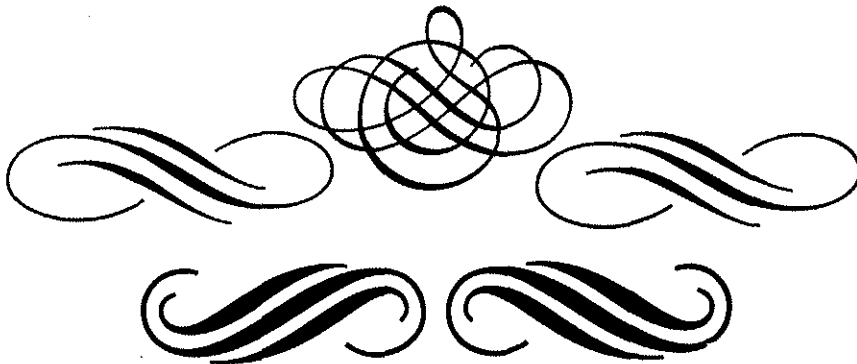
"Thank you, Mr. Spock. It's nice to know that Lee, Jan and Paul had a part in creating our history. They would have liked to know that."

"As for you two - next time you go on shore leave I think I'll put a leash on you," Kirk added with a smirk. "Or - better still - you can stay up here where I can keep an eye on you."

"Now, Mr. Chekov, you had better plot us a quick course to Fisher because we are already two days late and we all know how Ambassador Fox hates to be kept waiting."

"Yes, sair."

Chekov turned back to his console.



A SOUL'S ODYSSEY

by

Alinda Alain

PRELUDE 1 - Before the Beginning...

Some believe that that which we call LIFE has no beginning, has no end.

Some believe that LIFE merely goes through stages, reincarnations, estates.

And, for some, as they believe, so it is.

* * * * *

It was called 'pre-existence' or 'first estate'. Or put more simply, it was that first time in which all things that existed became aware of themselves as conscious individual identities.

It was a time of wondrous first childhood, of learning and discovery with all of the universe as campus.

It was also a time of decision, one which would greatly affect the nature of the 'second estate', the time of testing and challenge, the time most commonly referred to as mortality.

All of LIFE in its infinite diversity gathered before the Creator, the Organiser, the Lawgiver, the Father.

Two philosophical schools of thought were placed before them for consideration.

The FIRST: Agency, requiring that there be choices, opposition (a right and a wrong, a good and an evil) in all things so that there might be growth, progress, maturity.

The SECOND: Compulsion, requiring no choices, no thought, no growth, no progress, no maturity, merely obedience.

Two-thirds of the ALL chose the FIRST.

One-third of the ALL chose the SECOND.

And the Creator proclaimed the FIRST to be the path that the universe would follow.

But the leader of the one-third rebelled, and persuaded those that believed as he to do likewise.

And there was WAR.

Siblings against siblings. Friend against friend. Parent

against child.

And thus was experienced the first LESSON.

Agency. Freedom. Choice. Growth. Whatever the name, it was not possible without pain.

And to that sphere that once knew only LOVE, UNITY and ONENESS came sorrow and grief as the rebellious one-third were cast out and sent elsewhere to continue their existence.

ETERNITY wept.

But it was only for a short while, for EXISTENCE had many places to go.

Some of those places would be wonderful and majestic; and some would be terrible and sad.

* * * * *

PRELUDE II - At the Beginning...

And thus LIFE's second childhood (called by some, the 'second estate' or 'mortality') began.

ETERNITY burst forth upon the face of the universe as the ALL took their places and began to assume their assigned roles and stations.

But the one-third who had been cast out, cut off from any further growth and progress, were not yet content to be silent. With childish vindictiveness, they vowed to impede, distract, and destroy in any way possible all those who had decided against them, and against the way of the SECOND philosophical viewpoint. Indeed, they swore upon their very souls that they would bring about the SECOND reality regardless of the consequences to anything or anyone, even existence itself.

As MORTALITY came into being, a three-way distinction for the ALL was established.

There were those awaiting their turn to enter the 'second estate'. They were often called spirit/children, pre-lifers, angels, etc.

Those whose 'second estate' was underway would be called mortals.

And those who had finished with their 'second estate' and were awaiting a judgement on the next aspect of their existence, were often referred to as disembodied spirits or more commonly, the deceased, the dead, even ghosts.

Oh yes. Not to be forgotten were the one-third, who would soon be most often spoken of as devils, demons and the evil ones.

And with such background basics, thus begins this story...

* * * * *

CHAPTER I - Journey Into Darkness...

Spock put his cabin in order, touching but not seeing the familiar trappings of his life as First Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise. He was oblivious of the research project on the desk viewscreen which had held his complete attention only 29 days before.

Perhaps his successor would take up where he had left off on the research. For a fleeting moment he tried to concentrate on who that person might be but was unable to maintain even that line of thought.

In the deep recesses of his Vulcan mind a rational, calm voice insisted that he was being most illogical in his thinking and actions. No doubt the voice was correct, but no amount of reasoning - be it Vulcan or Human - was able to penetrate the mountain of pain crushing his soul, and as such, no word, promise or threat was going to sway him from his decision to resign. He knew that in his present condition he was unfit to function as a Starfleet officer any longer. In truth, he was unfit to function in any capacity which required responsibility and leadership.

The offer of the captaincy of the U.S.S. Enterprise by Starfleet Command had been automatically refused. Though they had insisted that he take some time to think about it, to reconsider, the Vulcan knew there would be no change in his answer, knew too that McCoy's and the other Humans' assurances 'that all things heal with time' would not be true for him. His soul ached with one conviction, his mind burned with the knowledge that continued existence without James T. Kirk was pointless.

Their friendship bond had been unique, like no other, and surprisingly strong. Neither had actually been able to fathom its reason for 'being', only that it was. Once or twice they had made cautious efforts to discuss it between themselves (the way men do, half in jest, half in third-person speculation). This had been especially true when certain rumours about their friendship's 'true nature' had been overheard at a starbase during a layover for repairs. The rumour suggested that he and Kirk might be more physically intimate than was appropriate for two individuals of the same gender.

(Oh, the discussions that rumour had provoked. If ever there was a cause of discomfort between them, it had existed those first several months following the overhearing of that type of speculation. Eventually, however, the shock of it had passed and their friendship had continued, none the worse for the experience, perhaps even a little wiser, a bit more clarified.)

Time seemed to stop and turn back on itself as Spock indulged in the mental flashback of other moments spent in conversation with his Captain and friend: the topics; the confidences; the Human's every facial expression and voice inflection; the moves each had made in their many chess games or gym workouts...

Then, abruptly, his mind rebelled, the Vulcan in him crying, *ENOUGH. ENOUGH. In the name of sanity, ENOUGH!*

Obediently Spock shook himself forcefully (mentally and physically) and firmly put away the train of thought, the images,

the memories.

Yes, it was truly enough. He would have to move quickly. Finish the cassette tape and sign the letter of resignation. Beam down to the Starbase. Go to the Vulcan Embassy. Find a Healer. State his condition and let them confine him before his sanity went altogether.

And his sanity would go...

Again he sensed the mental flames of destruction and chaos rise behind his eyes. The last time he had felt this out of control, it had been during his first pon farr. Yet, this state was somehow different, somehow more intense and all-consuming.

Why?

Could it be because he now had no anchor, no safe harbour in which to find comfort and acceptance when all else failed? During pon farr his body and mind had yearned to mate with a woman bonded to him by the necessity of biology. She had been a stranger - and the necessity had passed. He had never loved T'Pring, never really wanted her on a personal level. (Such considerations weren't even expected in Vulcan relationships.) True, one day he might desire that level of commitment - a planetbound home, a mate, offspring - but not then, not now, and perhaps not ever.

With Jim dead (*Who can I confide in now, my hopes, my fears? Who can I ask advice of with you gone from me, you who knew how to attract and please so many women?*) the thought of attempting another mating seemed unthinkable, impossible. His track record was already so bad, so painfully, bitterly, sweetly sad.

Jim, my Captain, my friend, my brother. Why did you teach me the joy of belonging, of finding and being myself and still being Vulcan, of unconditional acceptance, only to abandon me? Who would there be for him to lean on when next his mating-time came? Who would stand with him, giving him the emotional/psychological support to survive the inevitable rejection?

Such thoughts (he was slipping again) were so childish, so undisciplined, so Human. He must stop. He simply had to stop.

He had been a fool ever to let his defences down. But how could he have refused? Even now, amidst all this torment, if he could find a way to have Jim returned to him alive...

But it was illogical to dwell on what was not possible.

Spock knew only that this agony - so intense, so unbearable - at the loss of his best friend was a foreshadowing of what he might go through should he allow himself to love another friend, or a bondmate, or any offspring. Love and all other emotions must forever be removed from his future relationships.

Yes. If by some miracle he survived this ordeal, if he ever regained his sanity, his control, Spock vowed that he would never love again.

And I did love you, Jim Kirk. Perhaps more than I ever have anyone else. A very simple yet complex love. One without many words and physical touches, but one of the heart, the mind, the soul. I did love you, and as with my mother, I never told you.

Never.

And then, for perhaps the first time, aloud: "I did love you, Jim Kirk," Spock heard himself whisper, violating all that was Vulcan within him.

He did not care.

"Spock."

The First Officer looked up to find Dr. McCoy standing in the doorway of his cabin. A mixture of emotions filled him at the sight of this particular Human: gratitude; resentment; indifference; resignation. McCoy, even while torn by his own Human grief and loss, had been making every effort to comfort and support a hybrid soul bereft of its one and only safe haven.

"Spock, what are you doing sitting here in the dark?" McCoy was complaining. "I know you have superior eyesight and all but that's no reason to test it under these conditions." The doctor reached over to the wall control and turned up the lights.

The Vulcan blinked. Until that moment he had not been aware of the dimness in which he sat. Jim Kirk's death had taken all light out of existence itself. No artificial lighting mattered for it could cast no brightness upon the one face he longed to see.

"Spock, what are you doing?" McCoy's voice held a touch of surprise and fear.

"I am packing my possessions."

"To transfer to Jim's... to the Captain's quarters? You've decided to accept Starfleet Command's offer of the captaincy? Good. It's what Jim would have wanted you to do."

"No, Doctor. I am removing my possessions from the Enterprise."

"Oh, Spock. No. No." McCoy moved forward to stand before him. "Don't do it, Spock. Don't leave the Enterprise. Don't abandon this crew to a stranger. Blast it, Spock, don't abandon me! I need you, and by all that's right, I think that you need me!"

Spock summoned enough self-will to look up from his packing into McCoy's pain-filled blue eyes.

"Perhaps, Doctor, perhaps. But all that I really know at this moment - or care to know - is that I need him. And... and that he is lost to me forever."

He saw McCoy wince at his voice's utter lack of inflection.

"Spock..."

"Dr. McCoy... Leonard. Bones. If I still live a month from this day, if I am sane, I promise to return to you, the ship, and..." Spock stopped, unable to think beyond that point.

"Spock, if you think that I am just going to stand by and watch you withdraw into yourself and die, you are mistaken. I won't let

you do it. Jim would have my head if I didn't take care of you for him. And myself. Spock, I've lost one of my closest friends too. Don't you sit there and tell me that I've got to lose another one."

Sighing, Spock contemplated acceding to McCoy's wishes.

But it was only for a moment. It would have to be as he had promised; if he still lived a month from now...

Some time later, McCoy left. Vaguely, Spock recalled agreeing to do something that the Doctor had been insistent upon.

No matter. McCoy would discover soon enough just how devastating Jim Kirk's death had been for the First Officer of the Enterprise.

Alone once again, Spock finished his packing.

McCoy had barely returned to his sickbay and become involved in another medical problem before he received an emergency call from Scott to come at once.

A minute later the Doctor dashed out of the turbolift onto the bridge.

"Scotty, what is it? What's the urgency?"

The Chief Engineer sat slumped in the command chair, his features pale. About the bridge, the rest of the personnel looked equally as drained. Silently, Scott handed McCoy a tape cassette.

"What is this, Scotty?"

"Mr. Spock's resignation."

"What?! That's not possi... I just spent an hour... Where is he?"

"He beamed down to the starbase a little over thirty minutes ago."

"Right after I finished talking with him? Why that... that green-blooded, lying..." But the Doctor found that he could not go on. A sudden feeling of dread gripped his soul, choking him into silence.

Uhura rose from the communication console and stepped down to join the two men. "Mr. Spock gave me the tape just before he left," she explained to McCoy. "He intercepted me on deck 17 as I was preparing to come up to the bridge. It was as if he was in a hurry to go somewhere, as if he couldn't bear to come up here, as if he was running away from us, from any memories to do with the Captain."

McCoy took a breath, determination settling upon his craggy features. "Then we will simply go find him and bring him back. In his mental/emotional state he shouldn't be alone."

"Aye. We couldna agree with you more, Doctor," Scott said. "But we've already been stopped cold. The minute I heard what was

on the tape, I had Lt. Uhura and Security try to locate him." An expression of gloom clouded the Chief Engineer's features even more. "They found him."

McCoy's heart skipped a beat at Scotty's tone. *Oh God, no!* Had Spock committed suicide?

"Mr. Spock is at the Vulcan Embassy on the base. The... spokesman there informed us in no uncertain terms that Mr. Spock wants no further contact with anyone or anything to do with Starfleet, especially Humans."

McCoy shuddered. "Oh, no." Spock, in his condition, among only Vulcans. Were Vulcan Healers capable of recognising the symptoms of grief in a half-Human Vulcan? What precedent would they have? Spock was one of a kind.

As if reading his thoughts, Uhura offered a suggestion. "Perhaps we should contact Vulcan directly, ask to speak with Mr. Spock's parents. Or at least his mother."

"Yes. Yes." McCoy brightened. "Amanda would know what needed to be done and how to get through all the Vulcan red tape. An excellent idea, Uhura. Get on it right away."

"Yes, Doctor." The lovely Bantu officer hurried back to her station and set to work.

His inner time sense had long ceased to function. Therefore, Spock had no idea how long he had sat in the darkness of his temporary quarters at the Embassy. Nor did he care...

Hybrid. You who are called Spock.

The voice seemed to surround him in the darkness. He would have liked to ignore the voice but it penetrated to the very depth of his soul, chilling it even through the numbness and grief.

With an effort of will Spock focussed on his surroundings, seeking the owner of the voice. After a moment he saw a vaguely humanoid figure taking shape in the far corner of his room. Fleeting, he considered alerting Embassy Security, but could not find the motivation to make the effort.

I have something for you, Half-breed, the entity announced. Something which will greatly interest you.

There is nothing which you or anyone could have that would interest me, Spock thought listlessly.

But the entity moved closer. There was an aura of power, of menace about it which caused even Spock's numbed soul to flinch. It dropped a rectangular-shaped, flat crystal into the folds of the robe draping the Vulcan's lean body.

Look upon it, Hybrid. Think of what you most desire in all the universe at this moment.

Again Spock flinched, but this time it was in renewed pain at his loss. Absently, he glanced down at the crystal in his lap - and froze.

Jim's image (vague, indistinct) formed upon the smooth surface, dissolved after a moment, then reappeared with perfect clarity. The Human lay upon a stone platform (or was it an altar?), breathing regularly as if in sleep...

At first, Spock felt joy at the sight of his Captain. Then the realisation that this vivid illusion was evidence of his mental breakdown took hold. A Healer. He needed a Healer right away. The madness would only get worse if he delayed.

So you think you're mad, eh, Half-breed. Perhaps that is so. But it is a madness which can be yours again if you desire it. If you are willing to pay the price. Any price. My price.

Instead of responding to the voice, Spock stretched forth a hand to touch the image on the crystal's surface. His skin registered ice coldness at the contact, but his mind was suddenly flooded with a mental pattern he knew and loved: JIM KIRK's!!!

"Jim."

\Confusion. Loneliness. A growing fear which was being valiantly, firmly held at bay.\

It was Jim Kirk's mind (of that Spock was sure) but intermixed with it, between it and him was another's (unknown) pattern, the entity's pattern.

"Jim... Captain?" Spock fought his way through the alien's presence.

\Spock? Spock, is that you? Where are you? I can't see you. I can't see anything. It's so dark and cold. I... feel so isolated.\

\Captain.\ Spock felt an overwhelming surge of hope and joy well up inside him, which he automatically sought to suppress so that he could think clearly. \Jim. I thought... Captain, you have been listed as dead for the past 28 days, 5 hours and 22 minutes.\

Spock sensed the shock and disbelief in Kirk at his words. Then:

\Spock, I can't argue the point. I have no memory of that length of time passing. Did you find a body... my body?\

\No. But I felt you... die.\

There was a fleeting stir of curiosity from the Human at that comment.

\Spock... if I'm dead, how is it that you are communicating with me?\

\Unknown.\ The impossibility of this situation sought to impress itself upon Spock.

\Where are you, Spock? And the ship? McCoy, Scotty and the others, are they all right?\

\All are well. The Enterprise is in orbit about Starbase 4.\

\And my... remains, where are they? How did I die?\

\We were called to investigate some unexplained energy emissions coming from the planet Triacus II... \ Spock stopped, a cold chill gripping him as his mind suddenly entertained the possibilities of deception.

\Spock... Spock? Where are you? I'm feeling alone... isolated again. I... Spock?\

Vulcan logic and reason screamed: *Illusion! Madness! Break off now before it is too late. Get help...*

But it was already too late. Jim Kirk's mind-voice called to him. The Human was alone and vulnerable. Try as he might, Spock could not make himself ignore his Captain's helplessness. (Also, he simply found it impossible to believe that anyone or anything could so completely duplicate Kirk's mental pattern. Against all odds, this had to be real.)

\I am here, Jim.\

Relief flowed from the Human, embracing the Vulcan with joy unmeasurable.

\I though I'd lost contact for a moment. What hap... Never mind. Later for that. Let's get back to this business of my dying on Triacus. That's the planet where we encountered the malignant entity, Gorgon, a few years back, isn't it?\

\Yes.\

Yes. The vague humanoid shape took on more substance and clarity, its voice shattering the fragile contact between him and Jim Kirk.

Alarmed, Spock clutched the flat crystal, his dark eyes searching frantically for the lost image, his mind seeking the familiar, vibrant, living thoughts.

\Captain... Jim... JIM!!\

That is all you get, Vulcan, until we come to an agreement.

Fighting against an emotional surge of desperation, Spock looked up, focusing upon the entity.

"Who are you? What are you? Where is Captain Kirk?"

The entity chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound. Did you and your precious Captain really think to overcome the power of the MARAUDERS so easily? Did you really think that there would be no retaliation for your interference in our return to the mortal sphere of existence?

"Gorgon!" Spock questioned in a startled whisper. "The 'Friendly Angel'?" (Gorgon was the disembodied entity that they had found on Triacus II who had turned out to be anything but friendly. Its plans for the galaxy had been to gather as many followers as it could deceive and lead them on a holy war-rampage against those who would not be deceived.)

No. You and your Captain drove the one called Gorgon into the dimension-of-no-return. I... I am called Spxyx. And I now hold Jim Kirk's life, his very essence in my power. He is mine to do to and

with whatever I desire. Behold...

Kirk's image reformed within the rectangular crystal. Only this time the Human was not alone. Dark, threatening shapes surrounded the sensitive, displaced soul... touching it...

Kirk seemed to writhe at the contact.

Fear radiated throughout the Human's emotional aura, but as always, his Captain was making a valiant effort to endure it bravely, silently...

The aura of the Human's life-force began to weaken, as if each contact from the dark shapes drained him. Spock could sense that Kirk wanted nothing more than to call to him for help. But the Captain's quick, discerning mind had somehow reasoned that his predicament was being used against his Vulcan friend.

"Stop it, Spxyx," Spock heard himself whisper. "Stop it. Let him go. I... will do whatever you want."

Anything?

A sudden chill encircled Spock. What was he opening himself up to? Dare he agree? (Kirk's faltering life-force touched him.) Dare he refuse? "Anything. Only free Jim Kirk. Free my Captain and give him back the life he loves, the Enterprise, its crew, his command."

There was a long pause, in which darkness seemed to rebound with triumphant mirth.

Done, Half-breed. I will collect when you least expect.

* * * * *

INTERLUDE - A Moment's Reprieve In The Light...

It was as if the nightmare had never happened.

Only Spock seemed aware that almost a whole month had passed since Captain Kirk's disappearance on Triacus II. The rest of the crew and the galaxy at large were of the opinion that the Captain had been missing for only 24 hours.

With difficulty, Spock tried to recall the events that had followed immediately after he had agreed to... to what?... with the alien entity, Sp... Sp..? He could not remember the name.

(Spock realised that something or someone was or had in some way interfered with his mind, his memories. Being who and what he was, the Vulcan's mind automatically set itself to locate and overcome the interference.)

In spite of that, it seemed to the First Officer of the Enterprise that as each second (or was it days, minutes, weeks?) passed, his ability to believe (or recall) what had occurred during Jim's disappearance became more and more vague, as if soon he would lose the memory altogether. Such a mental state was frightening to a Vulcan and simply could not long be endured.

A silent voice whispered: /Leave it alone. You have Jim back. If you want to keep him, leave it alone./

His first clear memory was of finding himself on the surface of Triacus II with the search parties from the Enterprise. He had felt 'inspired' to investigate a clump of thick vegetation at the base of a rock-strewn hill and found the cave. (One not unlike that first cave where Gorgon's presence had been sensed by Kirk.)

Cautiously, he had entered the cave and found his Captain on a dark, crystal platform, unconscious but alive. All his efforts to awaken the Human had failed until finally he had gathered Kirk into his arms and removed him from the platform. As he neared the exit of the cave with his precious burden, Spock had glanced back to see the platform disintegrate into a pile of dust.

Later, when examined by Dr. McCoy, Kirk had been found physically weak, with a mild case of amnesia, but was otherwise unharmed.

A week passed in which Kirk slowly regained his strength.

One evening, a month later, over a game of chess in the Captain's quarters...

"Spock?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Did something happen between us before I beamed down to Triacus II? Something serious, that I can't remember?"

"No, sir. Nothing at all. Why do you ask?"

Kirk tilted his head, hazel eyes searching the impassive features of this man whom he considered his closest friend.

"I... feel you watching me. A lot. As if you think I'm not really me or really here. Also, you've yet to call me 'Jim' since I've been back. You've been so formal."

The Vulcan drew a deep breath, settling back in his chair.

"I am sorry, Jim," Spock said finally. "Your 'death' disturbed me in ways, on levels, I never knew existed in myself. And... I have a suspicion that your 'recovery' could or will cost me a great deal at some point. In some ways, I, too, am not quite myself."

Kirk was silent for a long moment. "No. I am the one to be sorry."

"You have no reason to be."

"But I have. In my own very Human, ethnocentric way, I've undermined your chosen cultural commitment to the Vulcan way. It's our friendship. I've known it for a long time. McCoy has warned me off and on from the beginning about it, but I ignored him. I've been as guilty as others about thinking of and expecting you to act like a Human."

"I am half-Human," Spock reminded, sensing his friend's distress and trying to ease it.

"And to be honest, some... most of my reasons for doing it have been less than honourable. I have been very selfish," Kirk continued as if Spock had not spoken. It was as if he had to say what he felt quickly before he had a chance to rethink it and lock it away forever. "I... Spock, there's something different, unique about us, between us. There are rules about some aspects of it, and none at all about other aspects. Sometimes I get a headache just trying to understand it. Other times I get a headache trying not to understand it, to just let it be, let it go where it will or won't."

Kirk stopped and a long silence passed between them. A necessary silence since this type of communication, this level of intimate sharing of one's feelings and thoughts, was rare between men, even men of such long acquaintance and closeness as he and Spock.

"What you say is true," Spock conceded eventually.

Kirk flinched as if hit, but knew that he had opened himself to the ensuing pain and revelations, and would have to endure whatever was to come.

"What you say is true, Jim," Spock repeated, but softened his tone. His gaze settled upon Kirk, their eyes locking in a moment of total honesty. "But I would have it no other way. You see, I, too, am not above being selfish."

Kirk kept his gaze steady, though within he felt himself deeply touched.

"McCoy and others told me how badly you seemed to take the thought of my death. I... we have to do something about that. Spock, your lifespan is almost twice mine. As your friend, I cannot let another day go by without making some effort to see that you have a reason to go on living when I'm finally, truly dead."

Surprise, then amusement, stirred in Spock's dark eyes. "And just what do you have in mind, Captain, sir?"

The question gave Kirk pause.

"I don't know - yet." Then a sudden, quick smile brightened his face. "But I'll think of something."

"No doubt you will," Spock murmured, feeling unaccountably better. (Out of every experience, there was a lesson to be learned. Or lessons. Perhaps the most important lesson from this was not to put all of your emotional gratification in one person. Or to realise that his life here aboard the Enterprise with Kirk was destined to end one day, and that he had better give some thought as to what he would do when that day arrived.)

However, such were his future worries. The nightmare was over. (Yes. Nightmare. It had all been a nightmare, he reasoned; one of his greatest fears come alive during a day of frantic searching for a beloved friend lost and thought dead.)

Jim was here, with him, alive and well.

For the moment at least nothing else mattered. Having thus decided, the First Officer of the Enterprise put the whole incident away, locking it from his conscious mind.

* * * * *



CHAPTER II - When the Veil is Breached...

A month from that fateful day, the Enterprise put into orbit about Starbase 4 for two weeks of R & R, permitting the crew a few days of relaxation and the ship to undergo some much needed repairs.

Kirk bade farewell to the base commander and left to join McCoy and Scott for lunch at a nearby restaurant/bar.

"Captain Kirk."

"Yes?" Kirk answered, turning to find a strange Vulcan addressing him.

"You are Captain James Tiberius Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise?"

"I am." The Human took a moment to study the speaker before adding, "You have me at a disadvantage. You seem to know of me, but I am not familiar with you. You are - ?"

"I am called Spxyx, and you are correct. I do have the advantage. I know you very well. And you... it is as you said, you do not know me - yet. But you will, soon. Very soon."

Kirk's inquiring gaze reflected puzzlement.

Spxyx smiled, an unusual expression on the Vulcanoid features. "I merely wished to make your acquaintance once more before we meet again. Good day."

As he turned to leave, Spxyx noted that Kirk's eyes gave him a thorough scrutiny, at the end of which the hazel eyes narrowed in even deeper bewilderment.

Let your mind be at peace, old friend. Soon all will be as it should have been from before the beginning.

Three days came and went during which Kirk went hiking in the mountains with a lady friend he had run into while visiting the civilian locations on the planet.

Upon returning to the ship, Kirk went immediately to the bridge. Making his usual rounds to each station, he greeted each crewman, coming to his First Officer's station last.

"Spock."

The Vulcan's dark head lifted. "Yes, Captain?"

An unaccountable wave of relief swept through Kirk at the sight of the familiar features.

"An unusual thing happened to me just before I left to go hiking. I ran into this Vulcan who looked a lot like you. Do you have a relative named Spxyx?"

A chill washed through Spock. Why, he could not fathom.

"No, sir."

"Oh. Okay." Kirk turned away, frowning thoughtfully.

Behind him, the First Officer's eyes followed his Captain worriedly.

That night over the chess game:

"There was something... I'm not sure what..." Kirk paused, at a loss for words. "Something struck me as odd about him. As if I knew him or should have." The Human paused again, looking across the three dimensional board at his friend. "Spock, he looked so much like you that I found it extremely disconcerting. As if..."

"As if what, Jim?" Spock encouraged when Kirk again hesitated, an expression of uneasiness clouding the hazel eyes.

"Spock, I had the uncanny feeling that Spxyx was - is - some kind of threat. To you. No, more than that. To us."

Human and Vulcan looked into each other's eyes.

"You'll be careful, won't you?" Kirk said after a moment.

"Of course, Jim. I always am. Unlike a certain Starship Captain," Spock said meaningfully. Kirk glared at him. Then, to relieve the seriousness of the moment, the Vulcan coolly added, "I believe I will have you checkmated in two moves."

Kirk's glare turned to a devilish grin as he reached out and moved a chess piece. He watched with satisfaction as the slanted eyebrows climbed into the silky, blue-black hair.

The great ship left orbit the next day and headed out for deep space, toward a quadrant recently opened to exploration. Several solar systems were encountered, though none with inhabitable planets suitable for humanoid life.

Then after a month of uneventful, monotonous surveying and starmapping, a system was found with ten satellite planets, one of which held the distinct promise of being suitable for colonisation.

Kirk, along with Spock and McCoy, joined the landing party assigned to survey the planet's surface.

"Let's just hope no 'little green aliens' show up proclaiming this space and its planets to be theirs," Dr. Leonard McCoy commented as he stood with hands on hips, looking about. His blue eyes held a twinkle that conveyed his approval of the landscape.

And what a sight it was. The grass was very green and ankle-deep. The trees were tall. The hills were sloping. And a blue body of water served as a perfect backdrop to the idyllic scenery.

"Jim, I don't suppose you'd consider another shore leave so soon after...?"

"No, Doctor, I would not." Kirk laughed, also taking in the refreshing paradisaical sight.

Listening to the Humans, Spock shook his head, his manner

suggesting clearly to the two that he found their reactions and conversation 'ever so predictable'. He moved off, the dark head bent over his tricorder.

"Critic," McCoy called after him, his voice holding warm affection.

"Please, Bones. Don't set him off," Kirk warned good-naturedly. "Let's not disturb the peace." He smiled at McCoy, who gave an answering grin.

The Vulcan topped one of the hills, the Humans' voices coming gently to his sensitive hearing. He would not stray far from the Captain or Dr. McCoy. This was a new, unexplored planet, with numerous unknowns.

And unknowns and his friends often added up to danger.

No. He would not go too far away...

Half-breed.

The First Officer of the Enterprise turned, surprised at the unexpected presence of the stranger. A Vulcanoid stranger.

"Fascinating." Spock checked his tricorder. "You are not registering on my instrument."

Your sensors are unable to detect my life readings in my present state.

"Indeed. May I ask who and what you are?"

I am Spxyx.

He saw recognition in the Vulcan's eyes.

I see that Jim has spoken of me to you.

"He has, but it was my understanding that you were a civilian on Starbase 4. How did you get here?"

I was, but only because Jim was there. Now that he is here, so am I.

"I do not understand. What is your interest in my Captain?"

The interest is simple. Jim is my Captain, not yours. Everything that he is to you, he was meant to be to me. The friendship which he gives to you belongs to me. As he spoke, Spxyx noted the First Officer's reactions, the not-quite impassiveness of the Vulcan features, the not-quite control and calm in the tall, lean form. I am here to reclaim my rights, my place in his life. To do that you must leave.

"Really. You assume a great deal." Though Spock radiated a strong sense of curiosity, even fascination, Spxyx knew that the Half-breed would not be easily dislodged from his chosen's life or his Captain's side. In fact, the First Officer was even now mentally and physically preparing himself to deal with any move or act of aggression.

Indeed I do. But it is only because I remember more than you do. Permit me to refresh your memory. Spxyx lifted an arm, his finger pointing almost accusingly at Spock's heart.

Sensing some form of attack, Spock reached for his phaser, but before he could move he found himself engulfed in blinding grey mist...

* * * * *

It is said by some that in that long ago BEFORE, promises and covenants of all kinds were made, not only between the Creator/Father and all LIFE in its infinite diversity, but between the conscious individual identities themselves:

With the exception of the one-third, all LIFE made a covenant with the Creator/Father requiring them to seek out, learn and abide by the laws of the universe which applied to them in whatever sphere of existence they inhabited. Failure to do so would bring about much pain and sorrow, as would carelessness and ignorance, but such were the risks and challenges of growth, of maturity. And so it was accepted.

But in addition to that covenant, others were supposedly made, albeit on not so grand a scale.

Promises of intent.

The most prominent and numerous ones were between males and females who would one day in mortality become mates and share in the wondrous challenge of becoming pro-creators (parents) themselves.

Others were between those who in mortality would one day be in parent/child and/or sibling relationships: aunts; uncles; nieces; nephews; grandparents; grandchildren; cousins; etc.

Then there were those promises and commitments made among groups, those destined to become entire family units, communities, nations, cultures, etc. Those who knew that come what would, in whatever stage of existence, they would always be of one mind, one purpose, one goal; many of whom would call themselves comrades, warriors-in-arms, friends, kindred spirits.

Covenants, commitments, promises, oaths of allegiance, loyalty, obedience, honesty, trust, companionship.

All were noble and beautiful in their original conception and pure intent.

And many were shattered during the division over Agency.

* * * * *

With a supreme mental effort, Spock fought the mental invasion and pushed Spxyx's thoughts and images out of his mind.

"Fascinating," the First Officer murmured when the familiar alien landscape returned to his visual awareness.

Yes. It was. Spxyx confirmed.

"I have many questions."

Spvxyx nodded, not surprised. Ask. I will answer until the transition is complete.

"Transition... "

"SPOCK!!!"

The First Officer of the Enterprise opened his eyes to find his Captain hurrying towards him. Dropping to his knees, Kirk knelt beside him, arms reaching to lift and support.

McCoy rushed up also, his scanner already out.

As if from the end of a long, grey tunnel, Spock heard his friends' words, felt their concern.

"Bones, what is it? What's wrong with him?"

"Calm down, Jim. He's regaining consciousness."

"Is he all right?"

McCoy studied the readings for a moment. "Seems to be."

The Humans noted the puzzlement that shone in the dark eyes as Spock sat up slowly.

"Captain, Doctor, I do not recall... " He trailed off, confused. Kirk's arm tightened about his shoulders. Grateful, he settled into the familiar strength, the accepting emotional warmth and worry.

"Apparently you passed out," McCoy said, "but my instruments don't give any inkling as to why." The blue eyes fixed on the Vulcan with a suspicious glare. "Have you made any changes in your diet or sleep habits without my knowledge?"

"I assure you, Doctor, my diet and sleep habits are as they have always been."

"What else could it be?" Kirk asked anxiously, impatiently. "Did you encounter any strange plants, insects?"

"Hey, who's the doctor around here?" McCoy complained.

Kirk had the grace to look apologetic.

Watching them, Spock found their attention and concern unaccountably soothing. Kirk's arm remained around him, the contact serving as a lifeline to... what? Reality, perhaps. Vaguely, he recalled that he had been talking to someone or something. A Vulcan... no, an entity that looked Vulcanoid. An entity that looked almost to be his twin.

"Spock?"

Startled, the First Officer realised that Kirk and McCoy had been speaking to him and that he had not heard or responded.

"That does it. We're going back to the ship to give you a complete physical," McCoy declared.

Spock started to protest, but one look at Kirk silenced him before he began.

Half an hour later, back aboard the Enterprise, McCoy stepped out of the examination room to find an anxious Kirk pacing back and forth.

"Is he all right, Bones?" Kirk asked.

"As far as I can tell, Jim, he's fine."

"You don't sound very convincing."

McCoy shrugged. "Vulcans don't collapse - not without a very good reason."

"What has Spock got to say about it?"

"Nothing."

"That's not like him."

"It is where I'm concerned," McCoy pointed out. "You, on the other hand, have the exact opposite effect on him," the Doctor grinned. "You're his favourite father-confessor, or is it kid-brother confidant?"

"Drop it, Bones," Kirk retorted, annoyed and worried. He hesitated a moment, then turned towards the room where Spock rested. "But you're right. He will talk to me."

The Captain moved determinedly through the door as McCoy took a seat at his desk to wait. Long ago, the Doctor had learned that when it came to penetrating the Vulcan's impregnable shields of self-containment, Kirk was about the best guarantee of success in the galaxy.

In a dimension where only spirits could see and hear and converse:

\Fascinating. You claim that the Captain and I, along with other mortals, existed before we were born.

Entrance into mortality is the second-birth, just as what you call death is the third-birth. I am sure that you will find that stage of existence just as fascinating as this one. Spxyx smiled. The freedom you will have without the hindrance of flesh and blood will allow you to go anywhere, observe and study anything.

The Vulcanoid entity talked on and on, painting a subtle but compelling picture tailored to appeal to and stir Spock's insatiable curiosity to know, to experience the new, the unknown. (Privately, Spxyx smiled to himself. His words were slowly drawing the Half-breed away from life, severing Spock's connections with his physical self. Soon the mental-physical link would be weak enough for him to move into the Vulcan's body.)

.

"Spock. Spock! Wake up!"

It was Kirk's voice, calling to the Half-breed. The Human's presence and concern distracted both Vulcanoids, forcing the insubstantial Spoxyx to retreat back into his dimension of exile, and pulling Spock to an awareness of his physical self.

Kirk sagged against the bed in relief when his First Officer took a breath and lifted the darkly fringed lashes to look up at him questioningly.

"Is something wrong, Captain?"

"Yes. For a moment you didn't seem to be breathing. What were you doing? Some sort of deep-trance meditation?"

McCoy, having heard Kirk's alarmed cry, rushed in, took in the situation. "What the devil! The overhead diagnostic monitor has been turned off. Spock, did you...?"

"No, Doctor. I did not."

Frowning, McCoy reached up to reactivate the board. It powered up and came on line without any noticeable trouble.

While the Doctor spent several minutes testing equipment, Kirk stood aside, out of the way, but kept a hand on Spock's shoulder. As before, the Vulcan sensed that the contact was keeping him from going somewhere else, somewhere cold, dark and empty.

Satisfied that the equipment was working, McCoy turned his attention to an examination of his patient. Never one for trusting machines at the best of times, he did his usual hands-on investigation, much to the Vulcan First Officer's annoyance.

"Blast it! I still can't find anything wrong with you." McCoy glared at Spock a few minutes later.

"All right, Mister. Tell us what's going on." Kirk addressed Spock in his most severe command mode.

"In truth, Captain, I do not know." And with that, Spock proceeded to share with them what little he could recall of his encounters with the unknown entity. As he did so, the Vulcan once again concluded that his memories were being interfered with by someone or something.

Shortly after their conversation with Spock, Kirk and McCoy sat facing each other in the Doctor's office.

"I don't know, Jim. I just don't know. One minute he's fine, coherent and aware. The next, he's withdrawn, mumbling nonsense about life before life, and letting his vital functions slow almost to a standstill." McCoy paused. "One more incident and I'm going to have to put him on complete life support."

Kirk rose from his chair and stood motionless for a moment. "You know something, Bones? Now that I'm thinking about it, and after listening to Spock, I'm realising a few inconsistencies myself."

"Oh, what is this, a contagion?"

"I'm serious, Bones. These last two months, the oddest things have been happening. I've been dreaming, but only half remembering. Some of the things Spock was saying in there triggered some very vivid images." Kirk trailed off as if lost in thought.

"What kind of images?" McCoy found himself watching his Captain, listening intently.

"Images of myself on some kind of... platform. With dark, shadowy shapes about me. And one... no, two of them were arguing about something, over rights and possession."

McCoy considered. "Jim. You and Spock. Have the two of you been experimenting with any of that mind-link stuff?"

"No, not lately. Why?"

"The way the two of you relate to each other sometimes is uncanny."

"So?"

"Jim, don't misunderstand me. But Spock is an alien. An unknown. Half-Vulcan, half-Human. A mixture of both, a sum total of neither. There could be complications which no-one ever dreamed of."

"What kind of complications?"

"Possibly slow mental deterioration."

"You just gave him a physical and psyscan and pronounced him fit."

"I know."

"And?"

"We may need to get a specialist, a Vulcan specialist," McCoy answered quietly.

Kirk stared at him, momentarily speechless.

"Bones... " he began finally.

"One more thing, Jim. I don't think you should let Spock play around in your head any more."

"Play around? Any more? Dr. McCoy, Spock does not play around in a mind-meld. They happen to be very difficult and draining on him. Nor do we engage in that kind of contact just for the fun of it."

McCoy held up his hands to head off the Captain's outburst. "All right, Jim. All right. I'm sorry. I don't really know what the two of you do when you're alone together."

"The same things we do when other people are around. We play chess and talk."

"Talk? About what?"

"Anything that comes up. Sometimes we use each other as a sounding board for our thoughts, our feelings. If the truth be known, I don't think I'd be able to keep it all in perspective if it wasn't for Spock's listening ear and counsel. His and yours."

"Well, it is our job." McCoy felt pleased to be included as one of Kirk's trusted confidants. "Our job and our duty, not only as your officers but as your friends."

"I know that, Bones. And I'm grateful. But what is all of this leading up to?"

"To be honest, Jim, I don't know. I just have this uneasy feeling that Spock's mental confusion and withdrawal have something to do with you. With the friendship the two of you share."

"And you want me to call in a Vulcan specialist. To do what? Tell me and Spock to stay away from each other? Or rather, tell me to stop contaminating my First Officer with my Human overtures of friendship?"

"Jim, what if you are the cause?" McCoy asked very quietly.

The Captain of the Enterprise found that he had no immediate answer for that one.

Spock had endured McCoy's poking and prodding with his usual patience, but during it all, he had kept his gaze focused on Kirk. Emotions, feelings uncharacteristic for him, had stirred at his Captain's presence at his side. A feeling of impending loss, of separation, possessed him. He was gripped by an irrational urge to embrace Jim, to bid the Human farewell forever and always.

Forever and always. Touching and touched...

A new fear gripped Spock. Was he slipping into some unknown bio-mental state in preparation for another pon farr? Was that why his thoughts, his memories were so jumbled? If such was the case then he needed to leave, to get away from the ship, from his friends. From the women and from Jim. He had no desire to become guilty of rape and/or murder by forcing himself on any of the ship's fragile females. Nor could he allow himself to become so mentally agitated that he failed to recognise Jim.

When I am you, Half-breed, such a danger will never threaten Jim again.

Looking about him, Spock was startled to find himself no longer in sickbay but standing on the now familiar mist-shrouded landscape of grey.

\Where am I? The Captain. Dr. McCoy. What happened to them?

You withdrew from them while recounting what little you could remember of our conversations. Spoxyx told him. And realised that your memories have been tampered with. Shall I permit you to remember all that you have forgotten?

\Then I must get back to them. They will be worried.

And well they should be. In fact, they are even now debating the matter of your sanity and whether or not Jim will ever be allowed to remain your friend.

\No. No-one is going to separate me from my Captain.

If a Vulcan Healer declares you mentally unstable, that is exactly what they will do.

\NO.

"NO."

"Spock."

The First Officer of the Enterprise opened his eyes and reached to grasp his Captain's hand.

"Jim."

"I am here."

Spock drew a breath and looked into Kirk's hazel eyes, seeking reassurance.

"McCoy is preparing to put you on full life-support," the Captain informed him. "And we are heading back to Starbase 4 at warp 6. Our records show several Vulcan Healers residing on the planet who might be able to help you."

"Then you believe that I am mentally ill, Jim?"

"Not necessarily. All I know is that you keep drifting away from us and every time you do, you stop breathing. Isn't there anything you can tell us to help you? Anything you can tell me?"

Spock took a moment to look about the room. He and Kirk were alone.

"I believe it may have something to do with your 24 hour disappearance on Triacus II," he said, returning his gaze to the Human.

Kirk stiffened. Straightening, he broke eye contact with Spock to marshal his own thoughts.

"Jim?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember anything that happened during that 24 hours?"

"No. Not really. Not clearly. I've had a few weird dreams."

"Tell me of their content."

The Human did, and just as he finished the wall intercom whistled, calling Kirk to the bridge to receive a top-priority message from Starfleet.

"By the expression in your eyes, I see that something in my dreams struck a chord. I'll be back as quick as I can to find out what."

As the Captain left, McCoy and Chapel entered and set about attaching the life-support unit to the diagnostic table upon which the First Officer lay.

\I am Spock. I will not permit you to take my place.

You have no choice. You made an agreement with me. If you break it, I will take Jim back. I will join him in the mortal sphere, or I will bring him here into mine.

Abruptly, Spock's memories flooded back. The month-long ordeal, the loss, the separation, the emotional emptiness returned to settle about him two-fold, as if it had never left. And along with it came memories of his first confrontation with Spxyx, the threat to Jim and... the open-ended agreement that he, Spock, had made to get Jim back.

\No. It was a dream, a nightmare. It did not happen. You have no claim upon me or Jim.

I will not be defied, Half-breed.

"Spock. Blast it! Spock! Wake up!"

This time the Human who called to him was McCoy.

"I... am all right, Doctor," he said wearily.

"Sure you are. I swear, Spock, if you know what's going on, what's happening to you and you aren't talking because of some ancient Vulcan taboo..."

"I assure you, Doctor, this has nothing to do with my Vulcan heritage."

"Then what does it have to do with?"

The Vulcan looked away.

"It concerns Jim in some way, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Spock made a decision. "Leonard, tell me of your memories concerning Jim's disappearance on Triacus II."

"Why? What has that to do with anything?"

"Doctor. Please. Tell me."

Seeing that his patient was becoming agitated, (Vulcans don't become agitated, even when dying. So this had to be important.) McCoy relented. "Okay. All right. You and Jim beamed down to Triacus II. Our wandering Captain got separated from you and the rest of the landing party, fell down a hole and ended up in a cave shaft where you, with your superior Vulcan senses and the tricorder, found him."

The Doctor finished and looked at him blandly, the Human expression saying: *So there, now what good did that do?*

"Is that how you remember it, Leonard? Truly?"

"Of course."

"You have no memory of coming to my quarters to find me packing to leave?"

"Spock, what are... " Abruptly, McCoy trailed off. In his mind's eye, as if out of nowhere, came a memory: a scene unfolded of him in Spock's quarters; of a passionate verbal exchange between him and the Vulcan; of Starbase 4; the Vulcan Embassy and the feelings of a double loss. "My God," the Doctor whispered when he could focus again. "Your mental confusion... it is contagious." His blue eyes fixed upon Spock with a look bordering on panic.

"Doctor... "

McCoy reached out quickly, setting the life support unit to come on line automatically should it be needed, and beat a hasty retreat from the room.

"McCoy... Leonard. Do not leave me," Spock called, a sudden panic building inside him.

Too late, Half-breed. Too late. You are now believed to be infected. You will be isolated. There will be no more interference with the transition.

\No. I will not permit you to change places with me. I am Spock. It is my life, my identity. I cannot, will not surrender what is mine.

The Vulcan's mind was powerful, and his self-will to maintain his identity adamant and strong. In spite of his claims and omnipotent boasting and posturing, Spoxyx knew he had no way to overcome Spock's determination and commitment to remain an integrated entity of mind and physical self. No way at all, except one:

I warned you, Half-breed. Defiance would cost you dearly. Behold...

Upon leaving sickbay, Kirk hurried towards the turbolift. The doors parted for him and he stepped in. "Bridge," he instructed the voice-command unit.

But instead of obeying, the lift took off at an unprecedented speed that threw the Human to the floor and pinned him there. The acceleration became so great that breathing became near impossible. If it continued, the lift and its occupant of flesh and blood would be crushed against metal and steel at the shaft's end.

\Stop. Release him. Do not harm my Captain. I will submit.

Abruptly the turbolift ceased its maddening acceleration. Kirk, who was barely conscious, managed somehow to keep himself from being slammed upwards into the lift's ceiling. And when the

internal gravity controls reasserted themselves, he fell to the floor to lie there for a few seconds until he recovered. Moments later, he sat up.

The turbolift doors opened.

Kirk found himself staring out onto the bridge. Quickly he scrambled to his feet and stepped out. At his exit the doors closed.

It was as if the incident had never happened.

In fact, a silent voice in the back of his mind was insisting that it was all just an illusion, a hallucination, about which he had better remain quiet if he wanted to keep command of the Enterprise.

Speak of this and Dr. McCoy will have to relieve you of command. He will declare you mentally incompetent. Lock you away. Alone. Away from all you love: your ship; its crew; your command authority; your friends. Spock...

Not lacking a powerful will of his own, Kirk wrenched his attention from the silent, paralysing voice.

"Gorgon!" he exclaimed aloud, startling the bridge crew. Like a jigsaw puzzle in his mind the vague, confused pieces of the last two months fell into place. And with that came one clear realisation: SPOCK.

The Vulcan was in danger. Every nerve and instinct screamed the truth of it.

"Uhura. Issue a warning to all personnel. No-one is to use the turbolift system until further notice," Kirk instructed the Communications Officer, even as he ran towards the manual crawlway ladders near life support. Ladders that led from deck to deck. "Also, call McCoy. Tell him to get to Spock. To keep him awake at all cost and not to leave him alone for a second."

Her confused but obedient, "Aye, sir," filtered distantly after him as he by-passed the ladder rungs and slid downwards.

HURRY. He had to hurry. Time was running out.

In spite of his previous conclusions and hasty retreat from the Vulcan's room, (he had never in his life abandoned a patient because of danger to himself - what had he been thinking of earlier?) McCoy did not hesitate to return to Spock's bedside when Uhura's urgent instructions from Kirk came over his desk com-unit.

"Spock. Spock," he called, shaking the First Officer forcefully.

There was no response.

And in spite of the efforts of the life support unit, Spock's vital signs began to fail.

Cursing, McCoy gripped the Vulcan by one shoulder and slapped his unconscious friend across the face with all his strength.

"Blast it, Spock! Wake up!" McCoy hit the First Officer again - and again. Helplessness and desperation gripped him. "Oh, God! Help me. Wake him up."

Then, as if in answer to that heartfelt prayer, their Captain arrived.

"Step aside, Bones. I know what to do."

McCoy obeyed, but not without protest. "Do? What are you going to do?"

"Get his attention. Get into his mind. Meld with him."

"What? Jim. You are not a telepath."

"I know. But I don't have to be with Spock." And so saying, Kirk began to deliberately tune out McCoy and the physical surroundings, not knowing how exactly but trying to reach into Spock's mind, into the place where a battle raged for a soul.

"Jim, if you're in contact with Spock's mind and he dies... if he pulls you so deep into his mind that you can't escape..."

McCoy and sickbay took on a distant, faraway quality to Kirk's perceptions.

"Jim," a familiar mind-voice exclaimed weakly from nearby.

"Jim." Another voice, almost but not quite identical, echoed the first.

"Jim. Danger. Go back. Get out."

"Spock," Kirk called, reaching, searching.

"Jim. Go back. This I must do alone. Soon I will return to you. Trust me. Go back."

That wasn't Spock. But another... Gorgon? Spxyx?

"Who are you? Where is my First Officer? Where is Spock?"

"Jim, I am Spock."

"No," Kirk replied with conviction. "You are not. Where is my friend?"

"I AM SPOCK," the strange/familiar voice insisted more forcefully.

Kirk ignored it, calling, "Spock. Spock? Where are you? Answer me."

"I am Spock. I am."

"Spock. Answer me. That's an order, Mister."

"I am answering, Jim. But you refuse to acknowledge me."

"There is only one Spock for me, Gorgon/Spxyx, whatever,



whoever you are. Do not think that you can deceive me. Here or back in life."

There was a flurry of motion, sensations - whirlwinds, explosions, pain, anger.

Kirk recoiled.

An apparition took shape before him, looking suspiciously like a mass of energy assuming the face and body of Spock.

"I AM SPOCK," It declared. "And you are mine. You are my Captain, my friend, my brother. Before the beginning it was so and it will be so again. I will not be denied. I will not be usurped by *him* one instant longer. You belong with me. YOU WILL BE WITH ME - OR YOU WILL BE WITH NO-ONE EVER AGAIN."

The apparition stretched forth hands to touch him.

"SPOCK!!!" Kirk put all the terror and horror his soul was capable of into the call, knowing that wherever his Vulcan friend was, Spock would hear, would feel, and answer.

There was a blinding flash of lights.

When Kirk could see again, it was to find two Vulcan forms, half blended together, as if superimposed one upon the other. Then the two Vulcans were apart, facing each other defiantly.

Before Kirk could speak, the two lunged at each other, coming together with sounds of thunder.

The Human realised suddenly that they were fighting for possession of his First Officer's life, mind, body, and for the right to be with him, Jim Kirk, to have him as companion, friend, brother.

Again the Vulcanoids fell apart, both collapsing. One stretched out his hand beckoningly to Kirk, crying, "Jim. Come to me. Meld with me. Together we can defeat him."

Instantly Kirk started forward.

"No, Captain," the other said urgently. "It is too dangerous. Go back. And never let him - never let 'Spock' touch you mentally again."

Kirk froze, horrified. He could no longer tell the two apart.

"Jim. Together. Always," the first said.

"Go back. Please. I beg of you. Do not take such a risk," the second pleaded.

Drawing a deep breath, Kirk made a decision and stepped forward, reaching out to the second.

"Spock," he said with renewed certainty.

The second's eyes looked into his with profound wonderment and joy. Dark eyes, whose shining, velvet depths he would know among a thousand such eyes.

"Are you sure, Jim?" the second asked, hesitating.

"Yes. I'm sure," the Human assured.

Mirroring the action of the first, the second stretched forth his hand to grasp Kirk's.

"I AM SPOCK!" Spxyx roared, rising and rushing towards them.

Spock came to his feet instantly, his hands closing about Kirk as he put the Human behind him, put himself between Spxyx and his Captain. He faced the raging entity, no longer deceived, no longer intimidated by the interloper's words and threats.

With a fury that profoundly distorted his features, Spxyx leaped at the Vulcan, radiating a true reflection of himself: a demon enraged; a demon foiled; a demon defeated yet again...

"Jim! Spock! Come out of it! Break it off. Wake up."

It was McCoy's voice. The concern touched, enveloped the two, drawing them back to the familiar, to the physical, to the world of their ship, to home.

They opened their eyes to find McCoy with one hand on Kirk's shoulder, the other on Spock's.

The Vulcan lifted his hands to place them over Kirk's. He gripped them gently, but declared with formal disapproval, "Captain, you have neither the training or the skills to establish a mind-meld. Please remove your hands from my face."

Kirk's eyes widened, outraged, then amused.

"Humph," he responded, jerking his hands away.

But Spock caught and held them a moment longer before letting go.

McCoy looked from one to the other.

"Are you all right, Spock?" the Doctor asked finally.

"Yes, Dr. McCoy. I am quite all right, now." The dark eyes looked at Kirk. Gratitude and joy shone in the velvet depths.

"Well... good. Now that's settled, would someone kindly tell me what has been going on?" McCoy demanded.

Captain and First Officer looked at him, at each other, then back at him, before saying in unison, "That is a very good question, Doctor."

"For which we really have no answers," Spock added.

"Only speculations at best," Kirk contributed.

The Chief Surgeon of the Enterprise folded his arms, assuming an I-am-waiting-and-no-one-leaves-this-sickbay-until-I'm-satisfied stance.

"I think that it was another one of those Marauder entities from Triacus II making a slightly different bid to re-enter our

plane of existence and create havoc," Kirk said. "This time instead of going after innocent, trusting, unsuspecting, naive children, the evil chose to go after our innocent, noble, Vulcan First Officer who allowed his logic and common sense to get side-tracked by scientific curiosity and a case of over-protectiveness for a friend."

Spock looked decidedly uncomfortable as the two Humans gazed down upon him, affection in their eyes, and daring him to deny one word of Kirk's charges.

"It calls itself Spxyx," the Vulcan began by way of recital, thinking to relieve his discomfort by relating the facts as he remembered them to his friends. While they were fresh in his mind he shared with the Humans some of the things that Spxyx had shown him.

"You existed before you were born?" McCoy repeated, incredulous.

"According to Spxyx, we all did."

"A nut-case," McCoy decided immediately. "What sense is there to that? And why wouldn't we remember?"

"He made some reference to a veil, a mental barrier on our memories of an existence and experiences that would be too much of an overload and distraction to us in our mortal state."

"A kind of amnesia?" Kirk wondered.

"Perhaps. I was, as you said, somewhat distracted by other concerns to pursue the topic in depth."

"If the thing was one of the Marauders, then I say none of it should be believed," McCoy stated. "It was probably all a trick to make you lower your defences, Spock."

"I agree," Kirk said.

Spock nodded, but made no comment as to whether he thought everything that Spxyx had shown him to be false.

"All that really matters is that we almost lost Spock." The Captain of the Enterprise glared at his First Officer. "Mister, if I ever catch you doing anything like that - sacrificing yourself to save me - again, so help me, I'll courtmartial you."

"Yes, Captain." The Vulcan accepted the reprimand.

The severity of Kirk's features softened, and he put a hand on Spock's shoulder. "Besides, neither your logic nor your loyalty was in working order. Don't you know that the best way to keep me safe is to have you at my side?"

Dark eyes looked into hazel.

"Yes. On that point I have no argument," Spock responded solemnly.

For a moment, Kirk contrived to look offended. After all, it was not in the nature of a man ever to admit to needing to be taken care of. But in the end, the Human relented, favouring his Vulcan friend with one of those 'Just don't let this go to your head'

looks.

Understood, Spock answered silently. And saw that he was heard.

Captain and First Officer locked gazes wonderingly. Was this something new between them? Born of this unusual experience?

We will discuss it later, both mutually decided, and let it drop until such time as Spock was completely recovered.

Kirk remained with them in sickbay for a little while longer, watching as McCoy gave the Vulcan yet another physical.

"Everything seems to be checking out okay," McCoy said finally.

"Good." Kirk sighed. And now that his worry for his First Officer was alleviated, his command duties reasserted themselves and he remembered the top priority message from Starfleet which he had never received. With a farewell glance at Spock, he departed for the bridge, promising to return as soon as he could.

Oddly enough, the Doctor didn't voice his usual objections to the idea of having healthy people hanging around his sickbay getting underfoot. Spock looked at him curiously.

McCoy made a show of checking out the life support equipment one more time just to be sure all was working as it should.

"Spock?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Do you sometimes feel as if we, the three of us, or at least you and Jim, were meant to be?"

"To be what?"

"Friends."

Spock was silent for a long moment. "Yes. We were meant to be friends, and more. Jim and I are t'hy'la. The concept, for some, by its very definition has no beginning or end."

"T - what?"

"It's a Vulcan term meaning soul-sibling. Somehow, some way, Jim and I have always known that our paths would run side by side. Oddly enough, a woman with gifted insight saw it too, and said as much."

"Oh. Who was that?"

"Edith Keeler."

McCoy drew in a sharp breath. That name, and the memories associated with it, held almost as much pain for him as it did for Kirk.

"Well, I still think it's all a bunch of mumbo jumbo. This existing before you were born. This knowing, this awareness while forming in your mother's womb. And the supposedly forgetting once you're born. What would be the purpose of it all?"

"That question, Doctor, I believe is one which has baffled the philosophers of many cultures and worlds for generations."

"Yeah, I suppose it is," McCoy conceded. He was thoughtful for a moment. Then: "Wouldn't it be something to really know what it was all about?"

The Vulcan gave the query a moment's thought also before answering, "Indeed it would." Suddenly tired, but feeling safe and content, Spock settled back in the bed, closed his eyes, and prepared his mind to do a thorough self-check. As he did so, he heard McCoy's, "...sensible thing to do. You need a good long rest. Maybe we all do. Letting ourselves even consider such outrageousness."

There was a gentle touch to his shoulder (McCoy's) which he accepted without flinching, even though the Human's emotional concern and relief washed through him. But also, and perhaps of more importance to his awareness, was the sense of Jim moving through the ship towards the bridge - with no evil presence hovering silently or invisibly nearby.

All was as it should be again.

This time the nightmare was truly over.

* * * * *

EPILOGUE - Reflections

Several days later, Spock, off-duty, stood alone before the ship's viewing port in the officers' lounge. Half an hour into his contemplations, a familiar presence touched his awareness.

"Jim," he greeted without turning.

"I knew that I would find you here." Kirk came to stand beside him.

They stood in companionable silence for several minutes.

"Spxyx. I've been trying to organise some of my feelings and impressions of him without much luck. Have you been able to form any of your own?" the Human inquired.

Spock favoured his Captain with a glance of curious amusement. "Why do you ask, Jim?"

Kirk shrugged, making no verbal response.

"I have been giving some thought to the entity," Spock admitted.

"And..."

"Much of what I shared with you and McCoy in sickbay remains."

"Except..." Kirk encouraged, sensing more.

"Since these are not my thoughts or beliefs, I am not sure if I can explain them properly."

"I'd like to hear them anyway."

The Vulcan nodded a silent acknowledgement, took a moment to marshal his thoughts and began:

"It seems that we lived before we came here. *Here* being this stage of existence which we call mortality."

"Reincarnation?"

"No. Not exactly. We lived with the Creator, with the being most people would identify as God. We were... are His children. His literal offspring, in much the same way as a mortal becomes a parent."

"Well that's a switch," Kirk reflected, having some familiarity with the other theory concerning the origin of life, the evolution from lower life forms. "So what happened? Did we do something bad? Get kicked out of paradise?"

"No. It was more a chance to progress, to grow, that led us to choose 'mortality' with its challenges, triumphs and failures." A memory from their experience with the Companion and Zephrem Cochran arose. "We were once told that 'immortality consisted mostly of boredom'. Perhaps that was true for all of us." A pause. "No. Not all. Not for some, like Spxyx. He did not want mortality, the temporary loss of the great knowledge, awareness and power that was ours in the presence of the Creator. He fought against mortality. He and many others. And he tried to persuade you and me to oppose it also."

"What were we to him that he should try to do that?"

"As the offspring of the Creator, we mortals are all siblings in some sense. But to answer your query, I got the impression that Spxyx and I were... are twins. The closeness between him and me, and with you, was shattered over the debate dealing with mortality. Our choice to come and his refusal created a rift which can never be mended. We and he can never associate on the same level and plane of existence again."

"Thus his efforts to exchange places with you. He was trying to come here to mortality and send you to wherever it was that he is," Kirk reasoned.

"Correct."

The Human was quiet and reflective for a moment. "Did you get any sense of what it's like where he is?"

"Only that it is what most mythology defines as hell."

"Of course."

They stood silent side by side, both captivated by the star speckled darkness through which their beloved ship travelled.

"Any idea as to what is to happen to us mortals after this life?"

"We return to the presence of the Creator."

"And then what?"

"Unclear. But it is believed to be glorious."

"Many fairy tales are designed to comfort us about life and death."

"They are indeed."

"Considering the hazards in our line of work, it's a pity that some of us are too cynical to believe in such things."

"Yes. A pity."

"Spock?"

"Yes, Jim?"

"The idea that we are brothers, and that we will know each other and perhaps be friends throughout eternity, come what may, isn't such a bad fairy tale to believe in."

"No, Jim. It is not such a bad fairy tale at all," the Vulcan intoned solemnly, remembering his earlier grief at the thought of Jim lost to him forever.

Now, however, in some manner which he could not yet define, the bitter sting of that eventuality no longer seemed so overwhelming. Perhaps it was the realisation that DEATH (not space) was the ultimate, final frontier that everyone would have to 'explore'.

Perhaps one day he, Jim, McCoy, Scott, Uhura and others of his friends would explore that frontier together just as they now did space.

Perhaps. But 'death' was still too much of a disturbing unknown to rush matters.

At the moment, the joy of having Jim at his side as they contemplated the vastness and mystery of space and the universe was all that he could ask and hope for.

Considering his great fortune at having found a career, a home, friends, and a soul-sibling in Jim Kirk, it occurred to Spock that someone might consider his life and existence something of a fairy tale too.

"Are you in the mood for a game of chess, Spock?"

"An excellent idea, Jim."

A fairy tale indeed.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life's Star
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.

("Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early
Childhood" by William Wordsworth)

God is a Father.
 Man is a Brother.
 Life is a mission
 And not a career.

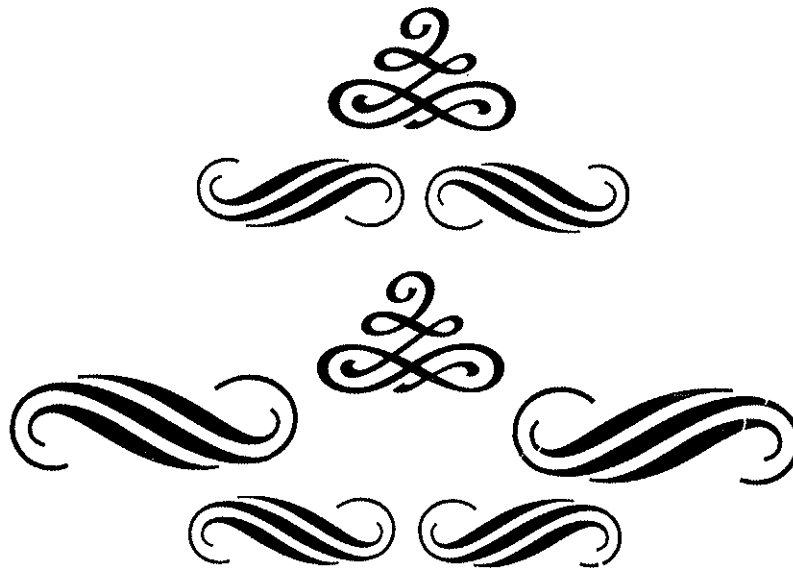
(In Stephen L. Richards' "Where is Wisdom?")

What is this thing that men call death,
 This quiet passing in the night?
 'Tis not the end, but genesis
 Of better worlds and greater light.

O God, touch Thou my aching heart,
 And calm my troubled, haunting fears.
 Let hope and faith, transcendent, pure,
 Give strength and peace beyond my tears.

There is no death, but only change
 With recompense for victory won;
 The gift of him who loved all men,
 The Son of God, the Holy One.

(Composed by Gordon B. Hinckley during funeral services
 for a friend)



TRANSCRIPT OF LEADING ARTICLE IN 'THE SON', (892 IV edition).

by Michael Simpson

Notes on the following transcript:

a) Regarding 892 IV, students of Starfleet history will note that this planet was originally charted by the U.S.S. Beagle which promptly then disappeared. This disappearance was subsequently investigated by the U.S.S. Enterprise leading to the incidents touched on in the newspaper article. For further information consult the section entitled 'Bread and Circuses' in 'Chronicles Of The U.S.S. Enterprise', published by Hologram and Interactive.

b) More specific information regarding the incident that led to the presumed 'abandonment' of the two officers concerned may also be accessed via the above publication under the section entitled 'And The Children Shall Lead'.

'BODIES FOUND! STARFLEET ADMIRAL TO BE CHARGED

'STARFLEET COMMAND today confirmed that the bodies of two Starfleet officers were discovered on the planet Triacus by the survey ship U.S.S. Rambo. This announcement follows weeks of rumour and speculation resulting from the Rambo's unscheduled return to Earth.

The officers have been named as Junior Grade Lieutenant K.T. Bucket and Lieutenant Toby Shortlived, both of whom have been listed as 'missing' for the past thirty two years.

But even more startling than their discovery is the fact that both were last listed as serving as Security Officers aboard the Constitution Class starship U.S.S. Enterprise under the command of the then Captain James T. Kirk.

The very same James T. Kirk who attempted to incite a slaves?' revolt here on 892IV.

And, though that incident itself was, in the eyes of Starfleet, insufficient to have Kirk thrown out of the service on the grounds of incompetence, it now seems likely that the Honorary Admiral, (who has already once been demoted), will face charges of negligence that will surely see him finally expelled.

Kirk himself is not available for comment but a spokesman for Starfleet admitted that the Captain's ownlog suggested that Kirk 'forgot' to go back for the two officers having allowed a group of children to pilot the Enterprise out of orbit of Triacus.

As if that were not enough Kirk details in his log how he ordered another Security detachment beamed directly into outer space!

Having then resumed command he instructed his helmsman to "Set a course for Starbase Four," presumably forgetting that two of his crew members remained stranded on a largely uncharted planet known to be inhabited by malignant lifeforms.

The relatives of both Bucket and Shortlived claim to have amassed a catalogue of further examples of Kirk's incompetence covering his entire career and have demanded an immediate inquiry and the semi retired Admiral to be brought to trial.

The Emperor has instructed former Proconsul Claudius Marcus, now in his late seventies, to make himself available at the trial as a character witness in an effort to prove to Starfleet once and for all that Kirk is the bungling fool the citizens of this planet, from experience, know him to be!

★★

NOT SO MEMORABLE MOMENTS FROM

STAR TREK V

THE FINAL FRONTIER

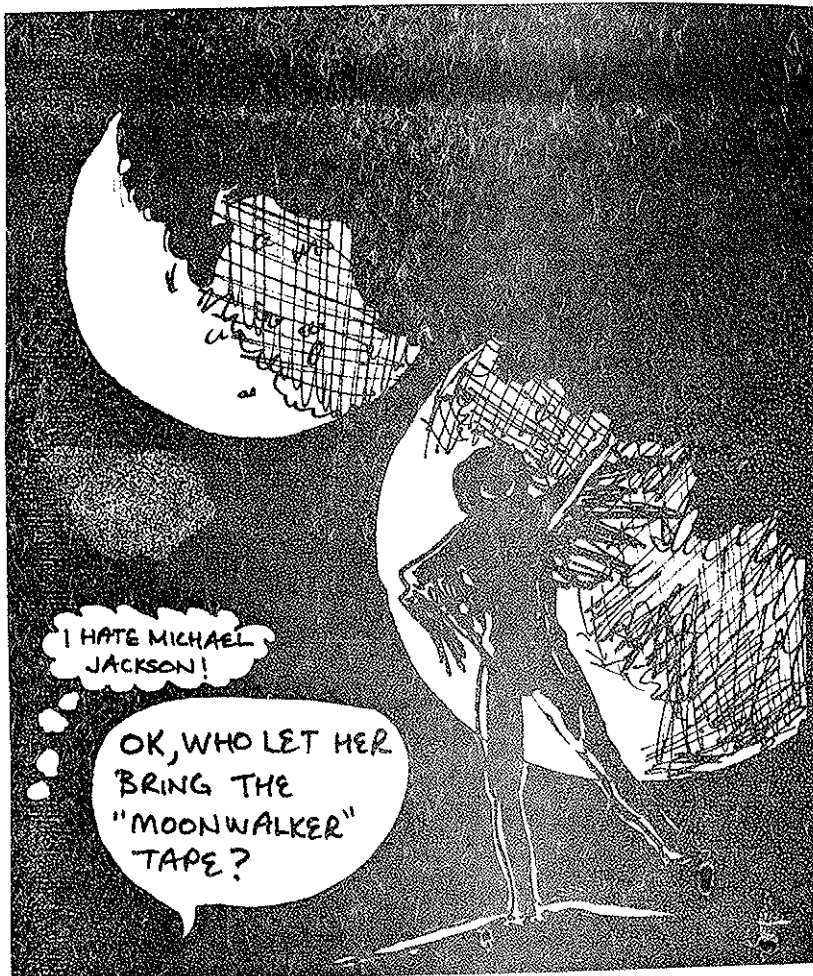
UP
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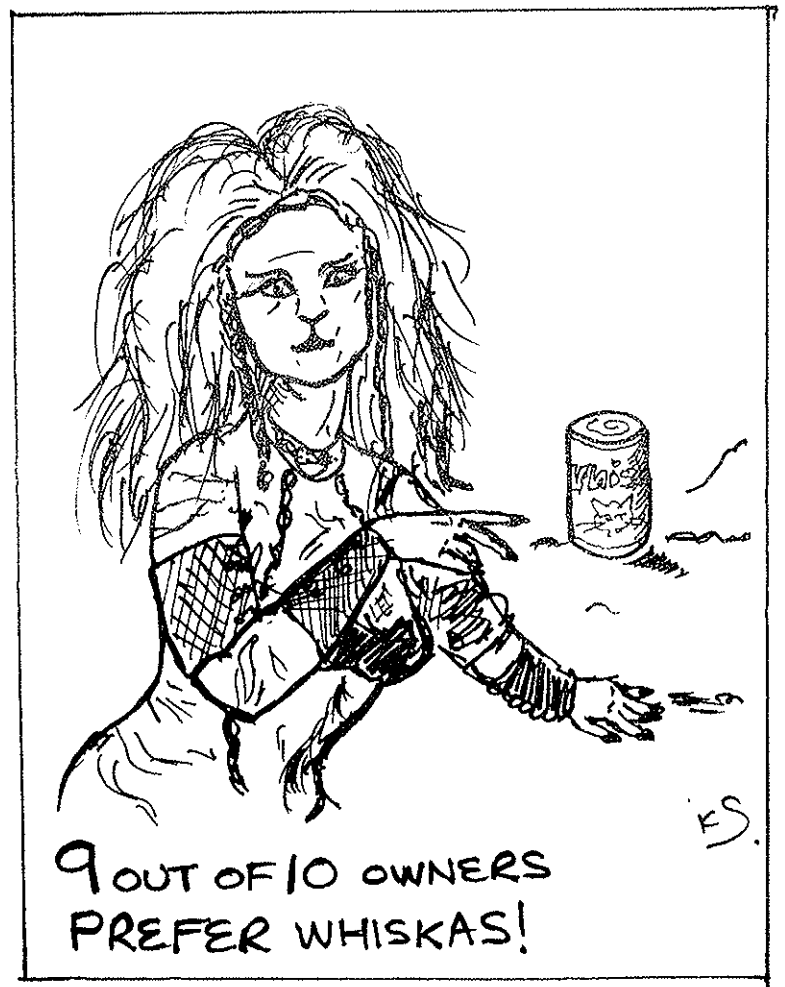
I DON'T KNOW
WHAT YOU'RE ON,
SPOCK... BUT IT MUST BE
PRETTY POWERFUL STUFF!

1,000 ft

NO
LOITERING







SPOCK, D'YOU KNOW
YOUR MARSHMALLOW'S
BURNT?

NEGATIVE, CAPTAIN,
BUT IF YOU HON IT, I
WILL ENDEAVOUR
TO PLAY IT.



SCENES FROM A DIFFERENT VIEW

by

Brenda Kelsey

Amanda fussed with her dress for the fourteenth time since arriving in the transporter room. She was nervous and she knew she was showing it. The Transporter Chief, John Kyle, studiously concentrated on the control panel as Sarek turned to where she was waiting. He extended two fingers to her and she gratefully completed the gesture. His calm thoughts soothed her tension as she apologised to him with her eyes. They stood together, Sarek concentrating on his wife, and she on him, oblivious of the personnel working in the room.

Spock arrived with Scott, glanced at his parents, then bent to help Scott check the replacement circuits. Scott, acutely aware of the situation and uncomfortably aware of the extra stress caused by the transporter malfunction, lay on his back under the inoperative machine and fumed silently, the rich oaths he would normally have uttered swallowed before they could be said. His control was noted by Kyle who could only see two pairs of legs, and Spock who had slipped into the narrow access beside Scott. Both appreciated the effort Scott was expending in not indulging in the safety valve of profanity in the presence of the Vulcan Ambassador and his wife.

Spock tapped Scott's arm lightly. Scott looked up into brown eyes that conveyed sympathy and understanding and Scott acknowledged the gesture with a slight, rueful smile, the anger receding.

"That completes the repair, sir," he said formally.

"Thank you, Mr. Scott." Spock uncoiled his thin frame from under the transporter console and stood up to receive Kyle's status report.

"System checks completed. Energy levels stable. The transporter is now operational."

Spock nodded and called the bridge.

"Bridge. Kirk here."

"The repairs to the transporter have been completed and the system is again safe to operate."

"Thank you. The Plenn are standing by to receive Lady Amanda. The coordinates are the same as before."

Amanda roused herself, smiled lovingly at her husband - having first taken care that her back was turned to the others in the room - and regally took her place on the raised platform.

"Please proceed, gentlemen," she said.

"Transporting now," stated Kyle firmly. He moved the controls smoothly, conscious of Scott and Spock poised either side of him to help if necessary. It wasn't, and Amanda glittered from sight in a

shower of melodic coppery flakes. Twenty point three tense seconds later Sarek relaxed fractionally as he heard Uhura's voice, over the still open channel to the Bridge, report Amanda's confirmation of her safe arrival. He left the transporter room without a sign that he recognised that anyone else was present.

Scott waited until the doors were closed before worrying aloud to Spock. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

"The only thing that we can do is respect his wish for privacy."

Kyle fidgeted then blurted out, "Commissioner Ferris was wrong, sir. I *had* to stop the first attempt. The fluctuation in the energy levels was disrupting the beams."

"I know, Mr. Kyle; and the Ambassador and Lady Amanda do appreciate that the delay was entirely necessary to ensure the Lady Amanda's safety. It was merely unfortunate that the regulating circuit faulted at that precise moment."

"What are the odds on such an occurrence?" Kirk's voice echoed down from the bridge.

"I have not calculated them. Do you wish me to do so?"

"Not unless you think it necessary. Just make sure that all the loose ends are tucked in and the covers put back nice and tidy."

"Sir!" exploded Scott indignantly.

"All right. Calm down. Just teasing."

"Aye. Well."

"What did I miss?"

"Commissioner Ferris expressed his opinion on the standards of maintenance aboard Enterprise," responded Spock calmly. "He did so just after Mr. Kyle very properly aborted the first attempt to beam Lady Amanda to the Concordance vessel."

The sound of Kirk clearing his throat issued from the speaker, then, "Ah yes. Sorry, Scotty. I didn't mean to ruffle your feathers too. How about a 'wee dram' to soothe your injured sensibilities?"

"I'd like that fine."

"My quarters in, say, an hour?"

"I'll be there, Captain."

"Spock?" The invitation was obvious.

"I do have some research which requires my attention."

"Disrupting your work, are we?"

"I have known quieter times."

"Have it your own way. Bridge out."

Kyle closed his eyes and dared to apologise again. "I really am sorry about the delay, Mr. Scott."

"Enough, laddie. Commissioner Ferris expresses his own opinions, not ours. And we know that you do your job well. Isn't that right, Mr. Spock?"

"Exactly correct, Mr. Scott. Mr. Kyle, you are no doubt aware that Commissioner Ferris has a positive talent for being at the wrong place at the wrong time and a propensity for saying the wrong comment to the wrong person at the worst possible time. If the power surge that you noted had occurred again during rematerialisation, as it would have done, it would have had very serious consequences. I doubt that the Plenn waiting to receive Lady Amanda would have been notably pleased if she had arrived inside out."

"Sarek would have been none too happy either," put in Scott.

"To say nothing of myself, Captain Kirk, the other ambassadors currently aboard, several admirals, the Vulcan Council..." Spock allowed his voice to die away.

"Point taken, sirs. I'll shut up."

"Carry on, Mr. Kyle." Spock turned to leave but paused at the doorway to say, "Thank you," before he hurried out.

Kyle smiled sheepishly at Scott, who shook his head warningly. "You did right, lad, and now you've had it confirmed. So calm down."

"But the delay!"

"Just got people a little more on edge and allowed Ferris to get in another dig, which I should not have risen to. You ignore him and his words like I'm trying to do and concentrate on your job. Will you be all right here now?"

"Yes sir." The reply was confident.

"Then I'll be away. Call if you do need any help, or if Ferris comes back and starts in on you again."

Kyle stood alone in the transporter room and uttered the strong words which Scott had so longed to do. The quiet rage which had been simmering inside him since the first caustic encounter with his fellow countryman was getting to him, affecting his work and his private life. He had exchanged some harsh words with some good friends because of Ferris. He used some more impolite phrases to describe the undiplomatic diplomat and felt a little better. When he went off duty he would have to hunt up his friends and apologise. Until then, which wouldn't be until Lady Amanda was safely back aboard, he'd do his best to make sure that nothing else could go wrong and delay that return. He bent over the console and began a circuit by circuit check of the transporter system. He had had to delay sending Lady Amanda, he wasn't going to permit any delay in getting her back, or give Commissioner Ferris another opportunity to snipe at Enterprise.

When Spock finally returned to the bridge the main viewscreen showed an enhanced view of the Concordance fleet; the lately arrived, and absolutely enormous, vessel filled a large proportion of the screen with the smaller vessels looking like shuttles in relation to it. Scott was at the engineering console arguing with two of his assistants.

"What you're claiming cannot be. Apply thrust to such a structure and the whole thing would collapse. Yon monster ship cannot be hollow!"

"It must be, sir.," the female of the pair insisted. "The mass is too low to account for any solid or filled structure based on any design conventions that we know of."

Kirk had swivelled around to watch the battle but Spock's arrival diverted his attention.

"My apologies for my delayed return to duty."

"Trouble?"

"Judicious prevention. I had to intercept Commissioner Ferris. He wished to discuss the latest developments in the negotiations with Sarek. I decided that under the circumstances it would have been inadvisable to allow him access."

"Meaning that Sarek might just have decided that it was logical to break Ferris' neck in order to prevent him making any more rash decisions where Amanda is involved? So you made yourself available."

"It takes less energy to capture a stationary target."

"Hmm. Where is Sarek now?"

"On the observation deck. I took the liberty of setting the 'privacy' light."

"Decision noted. I'll get Baillie's people to monitor it, make sure that he's not disturbed. Do you wish to retire?" The question was pitched low.

"I would prefer to remain on duty. If you will permit?"

"Carry on." Kirk waved Spock towards the science station where Spock immediately displaced the young officer and bent over the sensor controls. It needed no great deductive power to guess that all instrumentation was being directed towards the Concordance fleet. Scott's discussion group swelled to include four more of his specialists, a tightly bunched and verbally agitated group. Spock listened to the argument but did not join in; he was too busy trying to penetrate the heavy shielding about the ship which now contained his mother.

After a few words with Baillie, Kirk settled down to worry at a thumbnail, dividing his attention between the verbal battle behind him, the quieter but no less intense discussion taking place between Sulu and Chekov about the battle characteristics of the new ship, and his friend now engrossed with the sensors. The reactions of Spock's assistants who were trying to keep up with his activities told Kirk that Spock had left them far behind in his efforts to obtain results from the probes. Kirk glanced up at Uhura who waved

a negative, 'I'm listening', sign at him. He waved an acknowledgment back and stared at the screen again.

He hated waiting.

Sarek sat in the starlit emptiness of the observation deck and gazed at the ship that now held his wife. He could not be with her, could not help her in any way, so he settled himself to wait with as much calm as he could muster for her return. He told himself firmly that there were no indications in any of the discussions that the Plenn would cause harm to her, that she would soon be back, safe, with him.

Part of him despised himself for the illogical basis of his very unVulcanlike weakness. Amanda was the senior female diplomat with the mission. The request for her to attend the first discussion with the as yet unknown fifth and final race of the Concordance had been accepted by Ferris before he had ascertained the details of the meeting. Not that Sarek doubted his wife's abilities. She was indeed one of the foremost linguists in the Federation. She was also the daughter of an ambassador, sister to two more and had been his wife, travelling with him on many diplomatic missions, helping him, as well as carrying on with her own work, for years. At his instigation, and with the full consent of the Vulcan Council, she had been recognised as a Vulcan Ambassador in her own right, an honour which had been as unsought as it was totally justified. Amanda had never been anything other than totally successful in all of their 42 - or was it 43? - years together. He found that he could not remember, a certain sign of unbecoming emotion. He strove to calm himself, to wait patiently; but he knew that he was failing. His total commitment of love to the exasperating little Human was too strong to control. All he could do was wait and endure his own self-generated torment until she came to smile at him again.

Amanda calmly tucked away her communicator, proud of the way her voice had remained steady despite the frantic pounding of her heart and the way her stomach seemed to be insisting on climbing back up her throat. The Plenn waited for her to signal her readiness to follow them. Despite the seriousness of the situation she still had to fight the impulse to pat the Plenn. Any person who looked like a child's cuddly-toy version of an owl, covered in lustrously silky fur rather than feathers, was going to get patted a great deal - if the Concordance and the Federation agreed to instigate full contact.

She sighed, following the Plenn and carefully avoiding bumping into the furniture and other decorations - at least she thought that it was furniture - and reviewed the mission so far.

Five of the most experienced diplomats had been sent to begin negotiations with the Concordance, four from Babel and Ferris, who had been on leave. The arrival of the first Concordance ship, at the still-being-constructed Starbase that had been planned as the stepping-off point for the next stage of exploration and the opening up of a new sector of space, had caused a mild panic in the Intelligence Services. They had had not the slightest inkling that a grouping of star-faring races had been within contact distance of the new structure. Word of the new contact had been transmitted to

Babel, along with a request for four ambassadors to join Ferris, and as the Enterprise had been handy Kirk had been instructed to ferry the mission to the partly built Starbase.

She had been surprised when Sarek had wangled his way onto the mission; with his recent illness she had expected him to return to Vulcan. Later, when she had seen the effect that Ferris had on the crew of the Enterprise, she had realised that Sarek had followed Spock's career far more closely than she had ever thought (or than he would ever admit) and that he had joined the mission only to provide a limiting factor to Ferris' more outrageous social gaffes. She wondered again how a man so gifted in negotiating skills with aliens could be so totally insensitive in his relationships with his fellow Humans.

The mission had arrived at the Starbase to find a variety of Concordance ships waiting, with remarkable patience and good humour, for their arrival. It soon became clear why five ambassadors had been requested; there were five races in the Concordance, although only members of four races had been at the initial meetings. After the first meeting it had been noted that each of the negotiating teams from the Concordance had consisted of one of each of the four races, the Plenn, the Xar, the Jerensht and the Arrantusa. At Sarek's suggestion they had reshuffled the aides from the four ambassadors who had journeyed from Babel to provide five teams of mixed races.

Strangely, but on reflection not unexpectedly, Ferris had arrived alone. With no permanent support staff Ferris usually drew on the resources of the ship carrying him. Kirk had, after a little prompting from Sarek, offered that service to him and Ferris had chosen only two, Uhura and Spock. Amanda had felt great relief when the teams had been shuffled giving Ferris an Andorian, a Tellerite and Sarank (Amanda acting as Sarek's aide to free him for this onerous task); Kirk's blood pressure had been dangerously elevated by some of Ferris' cavalier treatment of his new staff. Uhura had immediately struck up a friendship with the Andorian Ambassador Carshinin, and the Tellerite Ambassador Narg, newly promoted from the staff of the murdered Tellerite ambassador, seemed to regard Amanda's son with fascinated awe.

Life had definitely become easier-though no less frantic and the discussion between the mixed teams far livelier as they argued with each other over the contents of the days' meetings. Narg, supported (or should it have been egged on?) by Spock, had argued that the Plenn seemed to provide the lead in most of the diplomatic movements whilst the Xar tended to be crew for the vessels. Ferris had violently opposed this view until Carshinin and Uhura had arrived late with the information that the fifth and absent representative, about whom very little information had been obtained, was the head of the Concordance security forces which were made up almost entirely of peoples from the fifth race.

The implications of this degree of racial specialisation had sparked one of Ferris' more prolonged speeches, during which she had noted Kirk (who had 'sat in' on every debriefing session as the Starfleet observer) exchanging notes with Narg. He had been very reluctant to explain what they had been writing and to spare him more embarrassed wriggings she had not pressed him. Despite all Ferris' overlong pontifications, one thing was clear to them all; the Concordance had been in existence, stable and peaceful, for a very long time.

It had been Narg who announced the news that the representative of the fifth race was going to join them. She smiled at the memory of Spock's dry report of the meeting during which the Plenn had told them of her imminent arrival. He had been attempting to gain information about the 'other ones', as the translators insisted on rendering the name of the missing race, and had discovered instead that the Plenn had a sense of humour. They didn't giggle as Terrans did. Laughter in the Plenn race was signified by that wonderfully fine hair being raised to a ninety degree angle from the skin, causing the Plenn to resemble vast thistle-down clocks for several minutes. When Uhura had pondered on this reaction, Spock's explanation that 'Humour is a manifestation of an interruption of instinctive defence mechanisms and that in his opinion a 2.5 metre diameter ball of fur would present most predators with a problematical mouthful' had left all the non-Vulcans demonstrating their own interrupted defence mechanisms. Sarek and Sarank had just sighed, very gently, and waited for order to be restored.

It was only later that she had learned about the cause for the Plenn humour. Sarek had been questioning Spock about the conversation which had caused the reaction in the Plenn. She had lain awake listening to their conversation, sorry that it was not taking place on a more personal plane but still relieved that it was taking place at all.

"I was enquiring about the life support requirements of the 'other ones'. I couched my question in the form of requiring the information so that any special needs could be readied in case the representative of the fifth race wished to come aboard Enterprise. That's when they laughed."

"Did they give you the life support parameters?"

"Yes. They said that basically it was the same that we all required. Except that the others needed a lot more room to stretch their wings!"

"Indeed. I fail to comprehend the cause of their humour."

"I also puzzled over the statement. I have reached a tentative hypothesis."

"I wish to hear it."

"What if the representative would not fit into Enterprise? If she were too large?"

"Any being that large would break the square-cube law."

"But we know that they are the only security force that the Concordance has. I draw your attention to the size and disposition of the corridors on the Concordance ships. They are far larger than they need to be for the races that we have met. Any organisation that has a security force would have to see to the needs of its members. The Concordance is old and stable. What would they need a security force for, unless it was for protecting the peoples of the Concordance against external aggressors."

"The control of internal opponents."

"Contra-indicated. If there was a need to control member races by force then we would be negotiating with the personnel from the security forces and not members of oppressed races. It is my

conclusion that members of the security forces are aboard the Concordance vessels, but for some reason we have not been permitted to meet with them."

"I do not see the logic of that conclusion."

She had drifted off to sleep at that point, leaving her husband and son to discuss the theoretical presence of the fifth race for the rest of the night.

These thoughts and memories whistled through her mind as she followed the Plenn. */I wonder if distracting thoughts are another form of defence mechanism? I'll have to remember to ask Sarek./* They had certainly helped her to maintain her composure so far but she was rapidly become uneasy. They had been walking for nearly 12 minutes through corridors which were fully four metres high and six wide. The occasional doors were equally high and wide. Spock's theory about the 'other ones' being physically massive was being borne out by the scale of the internal fixtures of their ship as well as the external dimensions.

The Plenn finally led her through one of the infrequent doors. "If you will wait here please?" said the translator in her ear.

"Of course," answered Amanda and the Plenn withdrew, the door iris closing behind them. She gazed around her, feeling very small and somehow insecure. The request put to Ferris had asked for the senior female Terran diplomat. It was only later, after he had accepted, that it had become apparent that she was expected to attend this meeting alone. And she had not felt quite so alone, or insecure, for a very long time.

She tried the door (which didn't open) more out of instinct than expectation, then resolutely turned her back on it and looked at the furnishings. The single chair looked comfortable and was exactly the correct height to go with the table. There was a decanter and single glass on it which drew her attention. She knew that without the benefit of analysis she could not drink the liquid but she was entirely unable to resist withdrawing the stopper and sniffing at the contents. The enormous grin relaxed her tension as she replaced the stopper. The liquid bore a remarkable resemblance to the brew that Scott and McCoy were producing from their illicit still. Turning from the table she realised that there were only three walls to the room. Intrigued, she took a step forward, then the room seemed to come into focus, explaining, in part, her intense feelings of insecurity. She was on a balcony.

The balcony was high up on the vast sphere of the ship, the curve of the ceiling comfortably low above her. She approached the unguarded edge then knelt down and crawled closer until she could risk a peek out - and down. Way, way down.

She shuffled backwards until she reached the chair and eased herself into it, shivering. The drop had been wholly unexpected in what she knew was a Starship. On a planet the height would not have come as so much of a shock, but this was a Starship, and it seemed to be hollow! The technical improbabilities of the empty space caused her to exclaim aloud.

"Wing room? These 'others' need so much wing room?"

"Yes. That's right."

The quiet feminine voice did not come from her translator. She looked around the room a trifle wildly. There was no-one with her.

"Hello?" she ventured tentatively.

"Hello," came the instant reply. "I'm sorry if I startled you."

"You didn't. Well, not really. It was just a little unexpected, that's all."

"I apologise."

Amanda tapped her translator, then asked, "Are you speaking English?"

"Yes."

"Oh good. I thought that my translator was going wrong. They aren't supposed to but I could hear English in both ears instead of non-English in one and the translation in the other."

"Those little devices are very good. The Arrantusa are quite excited about them. Is the whole device in your ear?"

"No. There's a computer with an audio pickup that I have to carry with me to make it work. The ear-piece just gives me the results."

"That's very ingenious. We don't have anything like that. It would have made my job easier at times."

"Your job?"

"Looking after people. To be able to, you have to know what they think and feel and want protecting from. To do that you have to be able to talk to them."

Amanda frowned. "Surely that's only half the problem. Even if you speak another race's language you still cannot be absolutely certain that you are saying what you need to say."

"I'm so glad."

"Pardon?"

"The Plenn said that you are a linguist as well as a diplomat. Their report is correct."

"Yes, I'm a linguist."

"That was my chosen profession. I worked at it very hard. I still do but it's really only a hobby now."

"Your main job being protecting people?"

"Yes."

"And you've come here as the chief negotiator for your people?"

"As you have come here to represent your people."

"Only because the Concordance specifically requested the senior

female Terran diplomat to come," clarified Amanda.

"I truly have a reason for that request. I have a problem. I believe that I am guilty of a serious breach of my people's ethics although I was exonerated by an investigation into the events. I wish to know if I am guilty by your people's ethics. If I am then I may not represent my people here. That is why I asked for you, the senior female representative; because I have only ever had contact with the females of your species; to be precise - one female."

"When was this? Where?" asked Amanda eagerly.

"A long time ago, when I was little more than a cub. Barely fifty years old. As to where - this was the planet."

The table showed a picture and Amanda moved the decanter and glass to get a better look.

"Do you recognise this world?"

Amanda smiled. "Indeed I do." The distinctive silvered blue-green globe showed the unmistakable shape of Australia. "That's the world where I was born."

"I thought that it would be. That's where all the troubles that I had happened. We, the Concordance, have been waiting and watching for the emergence of your people from that sector of space. In truth we never expected that you would have made it out so quickly, or that you would have joined together with so many others."

"According to my son there are some 700 different species of humanity in the Federation, 992 planets with full membership and 13 more designated as colonies. Then there are 612 colonised natural satellites, 76 colonised asteroids. I forget how many constructed inhabited bodies. The Federation always amazes me too."

"To have achieved such stability in so short a time." The voice sounded a little awed and, Amanda thought, somehow wistful.

"I have to be honest. Sometimes it isn't so stable. We've only just got over one crisis. It nearly ripped the Federation apart. One planetary system is rich in a mineral that we use to power our starships. There are other sources of course, but none which yield such a consistently high quality and quantity so easily. The system was not inhabited by sentient people before the wealth there was discovered. It's settled now by Terran-descended people, hardly into the second decade of mining. They applied for full membership and protection; they were being raided by peoples not in the Federation, and I regret to say, possibly by some peoples that are."

"They have the protection that they asked for?"

"Yes they do. But it was a near thing. There were attempts made to influence the decision."

"Perhaps we can be of use to you? To protect you?"

"As a rule we generally do pretty well at protecting ourselves. There is less racial specialisation in the Federation than there seems to be in the Concordance. With over 700 humanities there's bound to be."

"You answer my questions quite openly?"

"That's what we're both here for, isn't it? To learn about each other; to see if it's safe to let our humanities meet or whether we'll be mutually harmful. We both have to find out now so that if we decide that we shouldn't meet then we can act now to keep our peoples, the Concordance and the Federation, apart. You've come here to decide that, and so have we. How can we make our decision unless we find out about each other? To find out about each other we have to talk, and answer questions."

"And if this is a trap?"

A small chin lifted in stubborn determination. "That's what I have to find out too. If you are hostile then the Federation has to know now!"

"Even if it means your life?"

"The good of the many outweighs the good of the few, or the one. That's an old saying on Vulcan, literal translation."

There was a long silence. Amanda guessed that the representative was in furious discussion with her aides and advisers and wished that she could have the same benefit. As it was she was definitely on her own.

"I have some more questions for you. You may find them objectionable."

Mouth dry, Amanda replied, "I won't know until you ask them."

"The Plenn say that you are the mate of Sarek, the Ambassador of Vulcan."

"The Plenn say this correctly."

"They also say that the aide Spock is the child of Sarek."

"Also true."

"I would ask about the mother of Spock?"

"I am the mother of Spock."

There was another long silence. Amanda wished for telepathy for the first time in her eventful life. It might well prove that the cultural stumbling block of peaceful Federation - Concordance relationships was inter-species marriages, and the resulting offspring. There were many such beings now, but she knew that even in the Federation there were some worlds where the fact of the existence of her son was considered to be a thing of immeasurably great evil, a belief brought into being as a direct result of the Eugenic Wars and the cataclysmic aftermath.

"You and Ambassador Sarek are of different species?"

"That is correct."

"I would know how two such differing species could be combined?"

/Here it comes,/ thought Amanda. "Bio-engineering. The

intervention was quite drastic at times. Most of Spock's early childhood was spent in hospitals and medical laboratories while the doctors tried to build a normal child."

"And they succeeded."

"No. They built a very exceptional little child who grew up to be a very exceptional man. I am very proud of him." The last statement was made almost defiantly, tinged with the remembered anger of having seen the snubs dealt to Spock in the past, about which she could do nothing.

"I am proud of my children too. They are in the Space Service as protectors. They haven't grown too big yet."

"Grown too big?"

"A fact of life. The longer we live the bigger we grow. And we live a long time. After a while we get so big that we can't fit into a normal Spaceship any more."

"We did notice that this ship was a trifle... unusual. Did you have to have it specially built to come here to meet us?"

"No. This vessel was built for my predecessor. He loved to travel between planets, not to arrive but simply to travel, to journey surrounded by the stars."

Amanda nodded, thinking of some Humans that she had come to know who felt the same way.

"When he got to be too big he wrote several... poems I think is the closest word, about the glory of journeying. The Arrantusa decided to build this ship to indulge him. He was greatly loved. Now there are several other ships like this, ferrying the larger members of my species between planets. It was a worthwhile project and well executed even if it is a little difficult to embark and disembark."

"Our engineers say that there is a size limit on transporter technology."

"So do the Arrantusa. The shuttle is a trifle cramped but we can stand not being able to stretch our wings for short periods of time. The Arrantusa are our designers and builders. They express great wonderment at the ship Enterprise. They say that the design is not possible. That when thrust is applied those elegant engines should fall off. They quote many laws to prove this."

"Engineers are the same the universe over. Our engineers were arguing that it was impossible to build so large a vessel, mostly hollow, and not cause it to collapse the instant thrust is applied."

"I wonder if mothers are the same the universe over?" The voice was thoughtful, asking a question that was almost rhetorical.

Amanda went rigid, knowing that what was going to happen next would be something that she would not like. She did not know how she knew, she just did. Perhaps it was a mother's instinct.

"I have a request to make of you."

"That would depend on what it is that you want."

"You have changed your attitude towards me."

"I am beginning to wonder what it is that you truly want."

"Your son."

"No!"

The voice continued as if Amanda had not spoken. "My advisers tell me that diplomats are the same in the Federation as in the Concordance.

"We talk, we learn, we minimise problems or resolve them. They say that your opinion on my problem will be ... diplomatic. That it might not be what a serving officer in your StarFleet would think."

"All situations are different. Decisions can only be made if the facts are known," temporised Amanda.

"Exactly. Your son, the aide Spock, is also a serving member of Starfleet. A senior officer, the second in rank of Enterprise. His judgement too is required."

"Very well. If you will tell me what happened?"

"We request that he joins you here. A proof of your Federation's peaceful intentions towards the people of the Concordance."

Mind racing, Amanda tried to think of a way out of the dilemma. She most emphatically did not want to bring Spock aboard the Concordance vessel. The questions about his birth had reminded her too clearly of others that had been asked - but she had a duty to the Federation as a whole to find out about the Concordance, for the sake of all the others of mixed race, and those who loved them, and even for the sake of those who hated them. For better or for worse her instinct to protect Spock would have to give way before the greater good. Literal translations of Vulcan sayings were all very well but it was something else entirely to have to live with the consequences, and with the reality that the one could be someone as precious as Spock.

"Very well. I will ask if he will join me here."

"You have the authority to command it."

"As you have pointed out Spock is a serving Starfleet officer and is answerable to his senior officer. I can request that he joins me, I cannot order it. Do you wish me to do so?"

"I do. As the final symbol of your people's good intentions towards mine. Your communicator will work now."

Resisting the urge to scream warnings to Enterprise she raised the small device. "Amanda to Enterprise, Amanda to Enterprise."

The reply, clear and strong, came immediately.

"Enterprise, Kirk here."

"Captain Kirk, I have a favour to ask of you."

On Enterprise Kirk gazed at the speaker set in the arm of the

command chair then up to meet the quizzical look on Spock's face. "That would depend on what it was that you wanted, Lady Amanda," he said carefully. His caution was not wholly lost on his friend, who had watched with well concealed glee as Amanda had backed Kirk into some convalescent corners during the stay at Babel.

"I would like to borrow my son for a little while."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I would like to borrow my son, please. A problem of ethics is going to be posed to me concerning the possible infraction of belief systems. The Concordance representative would like a serving officer's views as well as the views of a diplomat."

"This is a little unusual."

"But entirely necessary," responded Amanda sweetly. "I would not make this request unless it was entirely necessary, Captain. Believe me, my son is the one best suited to this task."

Kirk looked up at Spock, who was now standing beside the command chair and asked questions with his eyes. Unfortunately for his peace of mind he got answers that sent a chill down his spine. Spock gestured to the speaker, plainly asking for permission to speak. Kirk nodded.

"Lady Amanda?"

"I am here, my son."

Spock nodded slowly while Kirk frowned, certain that he was missing part of the message.

"If Captain Kirk gives his permission it will be my honour to join you in this task."

"In this the honour will be mine, my son," replied Amanda, stressing the 'mine' slightly.

Spock's face froze and he nodded meaningfully to Kirk as Amanda asked, with a lightness that Kirk now understood to be totally false.

"Well, Captain? Do I get my son?"

"Yes, Lady Amanda. He will be with you shortly, once he has assigned his current workload to his assistants. We will contact you when he is ready to beam over."

"Thank you Captain. Amanda out."

Kirk looked at Uhura who confirmed, "Communication ended." Like Kirk she had realised that information had been passed in the message that she did not understand.

"Spock?" asked Kirk.

"I think that Sarek should join us. I request that he interpret that message. It could be that I am mistaken."

"But you don't think that you are?"

At the decisive shake of Spock's head, Kirk hit the commlink control.

"Kirk to Sarek. Please respond, Mr. Ambassador."

"Sarek here?" The questioning note was obvious in the deep voice.

"Would you come to the bridge please. Immediately. We have had a message from Lady Amanda that you should hear."

"I am coming."

The commlink closed and Kirk looked up at Spock again. "I take it that we do have problems."

"The potential for serious consequences has increased by several orders of magnitude. I suggest that the ship goes to red alert status with the order transmitted by messenger. That vessel demonstrates that the Concordance has achieved many advances in science which are outside the Federation's current capabilities. It is a possibility that they might be able to tap into our communication network and, even if they cannot gain direct access to the content of the messages, they will surely recognise a change in frequency of activity and draw the inevitable conclusions."

The flat tone was another warning for Kirk as it was to all the personnel on the Bridge. It indicated that Spock was really concerned about the situation to the extent that he was offering command advice to Kirk.

"Considering your own displayed talent in that area, and others... Suggestion accepted." Kirk swung about to face the rear of the bridge where Baillie was waiting with his customary efficiency and anonymity. "Mr. Baillie, pass the word. All personnel to full battle alert but nobody, absolutely nobody, is to use the comms for other than normal routine messages, and tell them to keep up the normal routine. We don't want to warn any listeners by sudden changes to patterns."

"Understood, Captain."

Baillie had to stand to one side as the lift decanted Sarek onto the Bridge then the Human used the just arrived car to leave and put a well practised security drill into operation.

It was a non-standard drill of his own devising but once the word was passing around Enterprise Baillie knew that he would be able to report back to the Bridge in less than eight minutes. This did not compare to the sub-minute battle response that the klaxon and lights signals produced but was far and away better than the blank stares and questions which had met the first attempt at running the drill. His own departure from the lift into the Security monitoring section was considerably less dignified than Sarek's contrived unhurried haste and his clipped,

"Silent routine. Battle status. Code Black One. Initiate,"

sent security staff running on carefully designed courses whilst others began certain neutrally worded messages to other security stations. While he watched the sudden activity with narrowed eyes one portion of his brain was working on the wording of the message from Amanda. It was plainly directed at Spock and held

a danger signal. He decided to ask for an explanation when he went back to the bridge. The professional part of him was always interested in security communications and he was always willing to learn from experts.

"Captain?" Sarek looked a little ruffled to Kirk's eye.

"Play back the message please, Uhura."

Having guessed that that order was coming Uhura had set up the log replay for the main screen. A single command started the sequence and she watched with keen interest, as did the rest of the crew, as the replay unwound across the wide expanse.

When it had finished Sarek nodded, unconsciously copying Spock's actions. "Stont and T'Lenpt," he stated.

"That was my understanding of the intent," agreed Spock.

Both Vulcans looked at Kirk, who managed a sweet smile and asked, "Which of you is going to enhance my understanding of the intent?"

To his surprise it was Sarek who explained. "During the time of Surak, when the Tribal Warlords had yet to accept the precept of Logic, Surak's wife T'Lenpt and their eldest child Stont were taken hostage by a hostile element of one of the warring factions in an attempt to divert Surak's attention from his preachings to the tribes. The phrases that Amanda used were those recorded by the scribe of the tribe who captured them and are attributed to Stont and T'Lenpt, part of a discussion by the two of their possible futures."

"What happened to them?"

"They were killed when Surak refused to accept the demands of their captors. The story scrolls are preserved in the Family archives. Amanda is familiar with them."

"Your Family?"

Spock's cheeks greened slightly as Sarek answered, "The Family is descended from Spork, the second of the children of Surak."

Kirk chewed the inside of his cheek then asked, with a stilted formality quite alien to him, "Am I correct in assuming that Lady Amanda is warning us of treachery?"

"If memory serves," said Spock as Sarek visibly hesitated over the reply, "the phrases come from a section of their discussion which concerned the effect that their deaths might have on Surak and his teachings; specifically the conclusion mutually reached that if their deaths furthered the speed of the spread of Logic and so lessened the number of deaths accrued then the price should be paid."

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few - or the one," quoted Sarek. "A literal translation."

"Clearly Amanda has identified that a situation is possible, and wished to warn us of this. She has done so. If you will excuse

me, Captain, I will go and change."

"Of course, Mr. Spock. I'll meet you in the transporter room."

Spock left quickly before Sarek could object so Sarek turned on Kirk. "Change? You are going to permit him to go aboard that ship?"

"Amanda asked for him, and he said that he'd go. The Concordance are expecting him."

Sarek moved closer to the command chair. "If Amanda is correct it will be to his death."

Kirk lowered his voice to matching Sarek's earnest delivery. "His and Amanda's. I am fully aware of that, Mr. Ambassador, and so is he. He considered it to be his honour. I guess that he thinks as Stont and T'Lenpt and Amanda did, that the possible threat to the Federation is worth taking that risk to find out about. After all, Stont and T'Lenpt were only thinking about one planet. Spock and Amanda are considering over 700 humanities."

The words stopped Sarek in mid argument and he straightened, withdrawing behind a mask of inscrutability in a manner that threatened Kirk's composure.

"You are, of course, correct, Captain. With your permission I will inform the other Ambassadors of this development privately."

"Certainly. I have gone to Battle Alert." As Sarek's eyes flicked up to the status board, holding for a second the doubt that he could have ignored the warnings, Kirk hurried on, "By word of mouth. If there is going to be trouble my people will be ready to protect... the Federation. Ah - Mr. Baillie?"

"Battle status is active throughout Enterprise. We didn't tell the diplomats." Baillie gazed at Sarek.

"I will do so now."

Sarek appropriated the lift, neatly reversing the early exchange. When the doors had closed Uhura exhaled, then said, "For a minute there I thought that we'd need McCoy up here, to reassemble a transformed Starship Captain."

"I thought that he'd be totally transmogrified," quipped Sulu palming away the phaser that he'd discretely held on Sarek.

Beside him, Chekov, also tucking away a phaser, muttered, "Transmogrified?" testing the word that clearly wasn't in his English vocabulary.

"Look it up later," advised Kirk. "Scotty, I know that you'd rather be in engineering but I'd like you to stay up here until I get back from seeing Spock off."

"Aye, sir. Tell him that we've confirmed that yon craft is hollow. It's got an outer rind but there's nothing in the centre except atmosphere. Whatever is in there is big to need that much space."

With a worried look at the screen, again showing the Concordance fleet, Kirk left the Bridge and Baillie took the

opportunity to slip across the Bridge and ask Uhura, "Okay. Why was Sarek going to dump the Captain?"

Spock was already donning his dress uniform when the door chime sounded. "Come."

Expecting to see Kirk, Spock froze when he realised that his visitor was Sarek - the first time that his father had come to his quarters. His eyebrow tilted enquiringly as he identified the items that Sarek was carrying.

Sarek explained brusquely. "When Stont went to the War Lords' camp he went as the representative of his father, to speak his words, wearing his sash and his IDIC. If you remember there was a short period when the Lords thought that he was Surak, who they were expecting to come in answer to their demands."

"I doubt that the Plenn or the 'others' will make the same mistake, even for a short period."

"I do not expect them to do so. However if you wear my sash and IDIC Amanda will recognise them and so know that her warning was received here, and understood."

For a brief moment the air in Spock's sparsely decorated quarters seemed to come alive with the tension that existed between the two.

"It will be my honour," said Spock softly, and stood still as Sarek looped the heavy pendant about his neck and adjusted the richly embroidered material about his waist, neatly tucking the folds to conceal the fact that it had been made for a larger man.

"May I accompany you to the transporter room?"

"Yes, father, and if you would consent to stay near to Jim? Even a few seconds' warning would be of value in these circumstances."

"The good of the many?" questioned Sarek with what Spock thought could be a hint of bitterness.

Puzzled, Spock asked, "Should we not care about the fate of the many?"

Chastened, Sarek accepted the rebuke. "Of course. That is our heritage, isn't it?"

Warmed by the unexpected inclusion Spock nonetheless shied away from the threatening emotional exchange. "I must not keep Lady Amanda waiting any longer."

They made the short journey to the transporter in silence and considerably startled Kirk, who was pacing to and fro in front of the console, by appearing shoulder to shoulder in the doorway.

"The Plenn have already contacted us. You're to be beamed to the same coordinates as Amanda was. And Scotty says that the 'others' ship is definitely hollow."

Spock dipped his head in acknowledgement and took his place on

the disks, unwilling to make eye contact with either father or friend before the beams took him and resolved the room into the alien ship.

Kirk licked at his lips when Sarek's gaze remained locked on the now empty platform. "Sir, did you inform the other Ambassadors?"

Rousing himself with what was obviously an effort Sarek replied evenly. "I explained the situation to Carshinin and asked him to 'pass it on' to the others. They will obey the restrictions on the use of the comms equipment."

The Captain's communicator sounded and Uhura's voice asked politely "Captain Kirk?"

"Kirk here."

"Relaying a message from Mr. Spock. He has arrived safely."

"Thanks, Uhura. I'll be back shortly."

"Oh no you won't."

McCoy ambled in in time to contradict Kirk with the breezy self-assurance that only a Starship doctor could use in the face of the command glare of a Starship Captain. "You have been on the bridge for the last 14 hours straight and you haven't sat down for a proper meal for the last 3 days. I do not count chicken sandwiches and slugs of coffee as meals. So now you're off the bridge you can come along to the rec room and eat something while I watch you."

Sarek, thinking of Spock's request, forestalled Kirk's objections before they could be uttered.

"An excellent suggestion, Doctor, and I will join you both, if I may?"

At the wary look on McCoy's face Sarek explained to Kirk.

"I believe that my family physician has also been somewhat forgetful in the area of adequate consumption of nutriment."

Ambushed, McCoy retained his air of relaxation. "Unlike some people I have had to carry on with normal ship's routine."

"He thinks he's irreplaceable," explained Kirk.

"Everyone is," agreed Sarek placidly then continued, "There is only one Leonard Horatio McCoy. Isn't there?"

"I hope so."

"Watch it, Captain. From where I stand the irreplaceable James Tiberius is too present by 3.2 kilos. Again."

Snarling and heckling each other Captain and Doctor led the way to the rec room, trailed by a vastly diverted Ambassador.

"And I'm telling you that your tolerance level decreases in relation to the nearness of imposed diplomats on Enterprise," stated McCoy, dumping down his plates onto an unoccupied corner table.

"It does not," shot back Kirk.

"I know that mine does. How do you prevent this negative attitude?" asked Sarek slipping into the third seat.

"Ah... " said Kirk, hurriedly checking the food on the table and breathing a sigh when he realised that both he and McCoy had selected vegetarian meals. "Well, maybe it doesn't"

"It would have been very surprising, not to say intriguing, if you did not react in a negative way to Commissioner Ferris. The Captain of the last vessel that he was using as a diplomatic shuttle threatened to kick him out of the airlock." Sarek delivered the fact with an astonishingly straight face.

"In his underwear?" ventured McCoy.

"I believe that the Captain was heard to express the opinion that to allow the Commissioner to retain his underwear would have been a terrible waste of underwear."

McCoy choked, giggled and sparked Kirk off. Sarek ignored them and ate some of his salad until they had regained some measure of calm, then he laid down his fork and began lecturing them.

"Commissioner Ferris is not to be underestimated. He is an extremely able negotiator, but he lacks the instinctive flexibility for negotiating 'in the dark'. Given a brief to negotiate a trade agreement with defined ideal solutions between known participants, he excels. Place him in a situation such as this, where the protagonists are unknown, and the goals indeterminate and he is only adequate. He is also suffering from a entirely Human emotion."

"You mean he has one, other than anger?" asked McCoy.

"Certainly. He is jealous. Of you, Doctor, and you, Captain, and your crew, and to a certain extent, of myself and Amanda. He recognises and understands his own failings; he can do nothing less for he is an exceptional talent and a diplomatic asset."

"But trade agreements never win glory," said Kirk slowly, dimly beginning to appreciate another side to the problem of Ferris.

"I know that you do not actively seek 'glory' situations. If that weakness was in your personality profile you would never have been promoted to a command position. Nonetheless you have a talent for the 'glory' solutions which inevitably attracts attention. Ferris has been active in his career for longer than you have been alive, James, and he has never been recognised by 'the average citizen'."

"Whereas Captain Hero here has to wear disguises when he beams down for shore leaves." McCoy waved a fork at Kirk.

"Hah. Can it be that you're jealous too?"

"Me? Of what?"

"Gentlemen!" admonished Sarek, and managed to make both highly talented Terran adults feel like naughty five year olds.

Kirk recovered his composure first. "Thank you for the warning. I'll try to ensure that I keep my temper around him."

"Please do. I would regret having to attend your court martial."

"The trouble is that the man's tongue is so damned sharp he can cut throats with it," muttered McCoy.

Sarek, having resumed his salad, was caught with a mouthful of food and a desire to know what prompted the sour complaint. He compromised and lifted an eyebrow at Kirk for an explanation.

"Don't mind him. Ferris made some pointed comments about the standards in the medical sections and enquired rather nastily about the length of time McCoy had been qualified as a doctor and where he had graduated from."

Sarek chewed and lifted his other eyebrow.

"Bones and Spock have this verbal insult tournament. Spock teased Bones about scaring patients with his beads and rattles and Bones retaliated by getting some and hanging them up in his office next to his diplomas."

Sarek had some difficulty swallowing and there was no hiding from the Humans the appreciative gleam in his eyes. McCoy choked with sudden laughter, suddenly recognising the supreme silliness of the conversation and triggered Kirk off again. They were still it when Ferris stalked into the room, clearly looking for them. He came over.

"Is this the sort of behaviour normal on your ship, Captain? You have declared Battle Stations! We are engaged in delicate negotiations with aliens and you sit here indulging yourself?"

Sarek spoke before the instantly sobered Kirk could reply.

"I hardly think that Captain Kirk could be described as indulging himself. This is his first full meal in three days. He has been on duty for 14 hours and it is a noted fact of Terran physiology that reaction time is impaired when under continual stress, and further diminished by fatigue. Captain Kirk is acting properly to ensure that he is fully capable of reacting efficiently to any emergency."

"But to sit here giggling!" protested Ferris.

"Where would you prefer him to sit?" asked Sarek with wide-eyed innocence.

Livid with rage Ferris turned on his heel stalked out.

Jim smiled admiringly at Sarek. "I wish I could do that to him."

"It has taken many years of practise to determine which is the quickest method to induce a state wherein he becomes speechless with rage. I have told the other Vulcan ambassadors. His speeches are particularly hard on us. He will doubtless now wait his moment and complain to you in extensive prose about many imagined shortcomings in standards and procedures aboard Enterprise."

"All will be received politely, I promise."

Noticing a slightly distant look in Sarek's eyes, McCoy

ventured, "How are they doing?"

Sarek's eyes unfocused completely. "Spock is concentrating, the sort of mental tone that he generates when he is deeply involved in a scientific investigation, or a chess problem. Amanda is also concentrating hard, but there is an undercurrent of amusement. There is a distinct diminution of the tension, as if they have decided that the possibility of a threat to the Federation has been lessened." He blinked and refocused on the present. "Ferris does not understand."

"We do. Thank you, sir," said Kirk.

"It is my duty, James; and besides, my son asked this of me."

McCoy stirred then asked, "Sir, I only know the little that Spock deigned to tell me about the Family link. Can I ask how immediate your reaction would be?"

"For an injury to Amanda, or Spock? Instantaneous. And this soon after such major surgery, fatal."

"If the worst does happen, you have no objection if I try?"

"None at all, Leonard, but do not feel guilty when you do not succeed."

"Me? Fail? Did you ever hear about how I operated on a patient and cured her by using 5.7 kilos of plaster of Paris as a bandage?"

Sarek conveyed polite scepticism.

"It is true, sir. Bones will tell you all about it. But can we go back to the Bridge now? I've already broken an appointment with Scotty to feed him some soothing liquid. Unless I get back there soon and let him go down to engineering I might just wake up one morning and find that he's disassembled the walls of my quarters!"

"A situation not without precedent. The engineer on the last ship but three did that to Ferris."

"Tell you what," offered McCoy, "I'll tell you about the plaster of Paris if you'll tell us about Ferris and the engineer?" He stopped, aghast at his daring. For a few minutes he had completely forgotten that the man they were dining with was Sarek of Vulcan.

"Agreed," said Sarek, wondering how his reputation was going to survive the encounter. As the colour flooded into McCoy's cheeks he wondered if he really cared. These two were his son's friends, his chosen companions, and their histories detailed exceptional talents in many fields of accomplishments. Some dimly hidden part of him also whispered that if he could make friendly contact with his son's friends he might also find a way to make a peaceful contact with the tantalisingly elusive being who was his son.

Spock eyed Amanda calmly as the Plenn carried in a chair for him and then left. His mother looked a trifle pale, and was sitting tensely, hands clasped in her lap. She relaxed fractionally as she

noted sash and IDIC.

"Hello, Spock. Thank you for coming."

"My duty, and my honour." Spock's eyes flicked around the balcony, taking in the table still showing the shape of Australia, and the open edge to the interior of the ship.

"The negotiator for the Concordance is the senior member of the people who handle the law enforcement and defence requirements. She wishes to ask our opinion of an incident which took place in her youth, on Earth. She requires to know whether her behaviour in handling the situation compromises our ethics, and also what our solution would have been in similar circumstances."

"Understood."

"She is very concerned about this incident," stressed Amanda.

"It is an acknowledged feature of a race with an advanced ethical framework that its members will be concerned how their behaviour will affect others. When will the negotiator be joining us?"

"I've already arrived."

At the sudden inclusion of the glorious voice Spock twitched, checking the balcony again. Amanda caught his eye and pointed to the open edge. "Although I have yet to meet the negotiator I believe that she is out there."

"Then this ship is indeed hollow."

"Yes. She has stated that she needs a great deal of room in which to stretch her wings." The edge of laughter in Amanda's voice betrayed the fact that her stretched nerves were catching up to her.

"I do apologise. In all the excitement I have neglected to introduce myself. My name is Tabinet. If I might suggest, that you sit down Commander Spock, and I will join you."

Spock sat, then half rose again as a massive head appeared at the balcony edge. Clad in glorious golden scales, the huge shape filled the gap. Multi-lensed eyes twinkling thousands of shades of blue focused on the pair and from a lipless mouth containing teeth as long as Spock the same voice said shyly, "Here I am."

"Good gracious! A dragon!" exclaimed Amanda and the head disappeared from sight immediately.

"I knew it! I knew it! They said that there wouldn't be any contamination, any remembrance that I'd been there, to Earth. I knew they were wrong. Diplomats! Pah!!"

Spock shook his head. "You are not the first dragon that I have met. I saw one once on Berengaria; although my parents did not believe when I tried to tell them of my experience."

There was a long pause. "Was dragon its name for itself, or your name for it?"

Spock looked a little nonplussed by the question then replied, "As both I and the person I met were very young we did not spend our

time in discussion of the finer points of linguistics."

"What did you do?" asked Tabinet.

"He asked me if I would like to see a particularly fine cavern, and I said yes and went with him to see it."

"Why does being called a dragon upset you?" asked Amanda, not diverted from the main theme of the talks by Spock's unexpected digression into his childhood.

Tabinet's head slowly rose into sight again. "I think that I can best explain by telling you of the incident that I would like your opinion about. That is if you don't mind?"

Amanda shivered then said, "Please, go ahead. This is what we came for, after all. Isn't it Spock?"

"Indeed."

The huge head shifted until its chin was resting on the balcony and sighed, a remarkably Human sound.

"It happened like this. I was very young, and it was my first assignment. I'd just finished planet-based training and was posted as assistant to the linguistics section of a cultural survey ship. The post was supernumerary, designed to give the holder experience in space without the weight of responsibility. We were mapping a sector of space that was rich in developing cultures. Some were quite advanced, some barely at tribal grouping level. It was very interesting work with so many different types of being and language to study. My work pleased my seniors; I found that I had a natural talent for alien languages, and I was allowed perhaps more latitude than was proper for my rank and inexperience. I didn't pay much attention to the rest of the universe once I realised that the latest planet had such an incredible wealth of language and culture."

"Earth?" asked Amanda.

"That planet." A long thin tongue coated with iridescent purple scales flicked the table picture. "We landed in a secluded area and I was given the freedom to go out and monitor the inhabitants alone. I found a small township, found a place of concealment in the centre of the market place overlooking the main trading area, and lost myself in my work."

Tabinet sighed again.

"I have never been able to determine whether I missed the alarm signal or if it was not sent. We have renegades amongst my people. Not many, and not often, but sometimes an adult will disregard his responsibilities and forget civilised behaviour. One such was hiding on Earth. He had been causing havoc. His monitoring equipment noted our arrival, and he killed all of the people at the ship site before he ambushed each of the landing parties. He killed them all. Everyone. When I came blundering back into the picture, weighed down with data and sated with new ideas, I think that I amused him. I can think of no other reason why he didn't kill me then, or why he later permitted me to escape from his ship. He allowed me to witness the terror and destruction that he was visiting on your people, knowing that I was helpless to prevent it."

"But you did prevent it."

"Yes. I didn't know that he'd killed already, killed everyone; so when I 'escaped' I went to the nearest landing party base to warn them. I performed the funeral rites for all those that I could find - what was left of them. That's where I found an undamaged weapon. I realised that I was alone and that it was up to me to try to kill Drargshoone."

"Drargshoone. Dragon," muttered Amanda. Spock acknowledged the tiny comment.

"I went to his landing site. I was hiding in a small cave, waiting to see if he would pass near enough to me so that I could fire at him, when I encountered the female of your species that I spoke of earlier.

"She was a most remarkable young person. At that time the recognition of ability was heavily gender-related, so when the people of the area had banded together for protection to fight Drargshoone only the males had been armed. Arming themselves would have had little effect against one of my people. It takes a great deal to harm or kill us and the men were only using spears, a few swords and some agricultural implements. May, that was her name, decided to see what she could do to aid them by making a reconnaissance of the area around his camp. She realised that Drargshoone was returning and hid in a cave to escape from him. Naturally it was the one that I was in."

"I gather that she was a little surprised to see you," commented Amanda.

"Dived into the cave, stood up, saw me, squealed and fell over unconscious. Our doctors have had no end of fun trying to work out the value of 'fainting'."

Spock refrained from commenting and Amanda stifled her response, limiting herself to a simple, "Something else that we can exchange information about."

"When she recovered consciousness Drargshoone was in the valley outside where we were hiding. He was... enjoying himself. I think that May kept still and quiet because she feared him more than she did me. He was, after all, a known killer. I was merely an unknown and a great deal smaller than he. While we waited for him to finish his pleasure May seemed to realise that I was hiding from him too. She had an empathy for living things that I have since found only in those who are drawn to be healers. Eventually he moved off down the valley and May... spoke to me. It was so unexpected. The culture that prevailed, that had nurtured her, often did not recognise as people others of their own species. And she addressed me."

"Are you going to eat me?"

"Of course not."

"I thought that you would, being a dragon and all. I guess it's because I'm not a princess, although I am a virgin. Aren't you hungry?"

"Very. But my people consider it impolite to eat those who can talk to one."

"The big dragon eats people."

"I regret that he is insane. Please do not base your judgement of my people on what he has done. I assure you that we are not all as he is."

"I guess that you aren't. I mean, you're so much smaller than he is, and you're golden, at least I think you are. You're so dirty it's hard to tell."

"I haven't had much time to wash recently. I've been too busy trying to stay alive, what with Drargshoone trying to find me, and those villagers nearly catching me the other night."

"George said that there was another dragon. George is the man that I'm promised to. He said that... Why didn't you fly away?"

"Can't. Drargshoone ripped my wing membranes. It'll be years before they heal enough to get me aloft."

"You fought with the big dragon?"

"I wouldn't dignify the encounter by calling it a fight. He simply caught me, hurt me, and let me go for a while. When he thinks it will amuse him he'll track me down and hurt me again. He's like that. All who go insane are like that."

"Then why are you here? This is where he lives"

"Why are you here?"

"I thought that if I... I want to find a way to destroy him! I thought maybe there'd be something in his home."

"There is, but I doubt that you'd recognise it as a weapon, or know how to use it if you did find it. Fortunately I've already got a weapon that will destroy him. But he has to be close in order for it to work."

"How close?"

"Not more than the length of his body distant from me."

"Is that why you're hiding in here?"

"Yes. If he sees me he's more than capable of using the same sort of weapon on me, and his are more powerful than mine are."

"Well, they would be. He's bigger than you are so his magic is bound to be that much stronger than yours is. What we need is a trick to get him close enough for you to use your magic on him but not to let him see you."

"That's why I'm hiding in here."

"So if we could lure him closer... Do you think that I could pass for a princess? At a distance, I mean?"

"A princess?"

"Yes. The lords of this land are trying to appease the dragon by offering to him their virgin princesses as sacrifice. They tie them to stakes or rocks. If I stood outside, maybe a bit higher up

on the cliff, do you think that he might mistake me for a princess?"

"He might mistake you for a sacrifice. But it is a terrible risk."

"Do you think that it's any less risky going home? He's just as likely to go there and eat me as eat me here. And if he does come close enough then perhaps your magic will be strong enough. He won't be able to see where it's coming from if you're practically underneath him."

"I've condensed the conversation down to the essentials, there were a lot of things that we said to each other that simply weren't understood. But that's how the main gist went and that's what we did. May stood up on the cliff and Drargshoone saw her, came over for a quick snack and I killed him. His death agonies were terrible. His body thrashed about on the valley floor long after the echoes of his shrieks had faded into silence. That's what saved my life. The mouth of the cave collapsed, burying me, so when the villagers arrived all they found was a very large, very dead dragon, and May up on the cliff. It took me a few days to dig myself out. I made my way to Drargshoone's ship and took off. Making it into a parking orbit was straining my abilities to the limit. I was a linguist not a pilot or navigator, so I sent out a distress call and waited to be rescued. My people came, heard my story, and went to clean up all the loose ends. We couldn't take the risk of leaving alien bodies, or alien technology where it could be found."

Spock nodded. "Do you know what happened to May?"

"She married her George, and didn't tell anyone about me. If she had they'd have burned her at the stake as a witch. I've always hoped that she was happy with her life but we didn't dare take the risk of going back to find out. In fact it was decided to bar all travel in the sector, to wait for you to come out to us. We never dared to hope that it would be this soon."

"An interesting tale," said Spock. "If I may ask, why did you act as you did?"

"It was my duty."

"Please clarify."

"Drargshoone should not have been on that planet at that time. The cultures there were still developing; the shock of meeting aliens would have been too great. They would have crumbled under the influx of strange ideas and never developed to their true potential."

Spock tilted his head. "I had assumed that those were your reasons from your statements about furtive monitoring and surveillance methods. We also have a rule that developing cultures should not be contacted until they are ready, willing and capable of sustaining the shock of discovering that there are other races 'out there'. The Federation has found instances where, like you, wilful contamination has taken place. In such circumstances the contamination has been contained as quickly as possible and steps taken to minimise the danger of further intervention. We have not always been as successful as you were. But why did you not accept the ruling of your seniors when they said that you had acted correctly?"

"Because I committed murder."

"You have spoken of Drargshoone and his death. Did you kill anyone else?"

"No."

"Then I submit that you acted correctly in this matter. You took the decision and the responsibility on yourself to protect an immature species from the depredations of a more advanced being. You killed him, but in doing so you prevented many other sentient creatures from being killed. Your decision, by the tenets of Vulcan, was logical. If you had failed to act, if you had not tried to prevent the damage he was causing, then you would have been in violation of our code of ethics."

"The same goes for Earth. We think that killing is wrong. But in the circumstances that you have described, not killing him would have been an even worse crime. Of course I am prejudiced in this. It's entirely possible that I wouldn't be here now if you hadn't prevented further killing and destruction." Amanda smiled at Tabinet, wondering if their words would be enough.

"And what of the Federation? And Starfleet?"

Spock twitched. "Any officer in Starfleet acting in similar circumstances to those you have described would have been commended. As for the Federation, it is made up of many different cultures, some of which would not condone your actions. However, I believe that they will accept that you acted in good faith according to your own beliefs, not for personal gain but for the benefit of others. That is what the Federation is based on - the concept of mutual acceptance and mutual trust and mutual benefit."

"That is how the Concordance began. It seems that we do have a great deal in common." Tabinet's voice sounded hopeful.

"And the differences will only be enhanced by the similarities," said Amanda stoutly, "though I think that I can foresee one problem."

"What is that?"

"What do your people call themselves?"

The answer was a muted roar of thunder that the translators ignored.

"What do the other members of the Concordance call you?" tried Spock.

"'Big Ones', 'Winged Ones', sometimes 'Loud Ones'. Why?"

"When you first showed yourself, do you remember what I said?"

"'Good gracious! A dragon!'" quoted Tabinet.

"That's going to be the problem. My culture, Earth, has legends of creatures that we call dragons. Like it or not I think that the name is going to stick to your people, just as the name Vulcan stuck to the planet where Sarek and Spock and I live. No-one, other than a Vulcan born, can pronounce the name of the planet or the names that they give to themselves. Vulcan is a poor

approximation of two syllables of the planetary name. It's the name of an ancient god of Earth. A god of fire and craft. Because our home is so hot by Human standards, and our produce is so carefully made, the name spread. Humans are like that; they like being able to name things, it makes them think they understand."

"But are you not Human?"

"Only by birth."

"What does dragon mean?"

"A dragon is a fabulous creature that can fly and breath fire."

"Although I cannot breath fire I can fly. I think that I could learn to like being called a fabulous creature."

"And the people of Earth can learn to live with the story of their salvation. There are some specific legends which could have been directly caused by Drargshoone and you, and George. I'm sure that once the initial excitement has died away there'll be many requests for you and members of the other Concordance races to visit. That is if you think that it will be acceptable to do so."

"I do. Oh yes, I do!"

Tabinet's head disappeared and her voice boomed out.
"Friendship. Friendship. They are just like us! Friendship."

Amanda crawled to the edge of the platform again and was rewarded with a dizzying sight of a vast, serpentine body coiling about the sphere and two massive wings fluttering excitedly in the now small confines of the ship.

"How big do you think that she is?"

"Between 110 and 130 metres." Spock was standing on the edge looking down.

"Come away from the edge." Amanda backed away on all fours.
"Spock!"

Spock turned, tilted a quizzical eyebrow at his mother and acquiesced. "I doubt that falling would have harmed me. I suspect that the only place with a gravity field inside the sphere is this balcony. All the rest of the space would have gravity fields set to repel, otherwise Tabinet might well find that she could damage the hull integrity with an incautious motion. That would also explain how this vessel could move under warp drive."

"You are correct, Honoured Sir." The little Plenn standing in the doorway was having a lot of trouble with his fur. "If you will permit I will escort you back to the transporter place, so that you may convey the great news of our future friendship to your comrades in person."

"And inform Commissioner Ferris that one of his national heroes is, in fact, the heroine's husband. Won't that be fun?" Amanda swept out, and Spock followed at a thoughtful distance, trying to plot how he was going to engineer the introduction of a certain golden clad Human to the golden dragon.

When they stepped down from the transporter platform the welcoming committee of Sarek, Kirk and McCoy was eagerly awaiting them, forewarned of success by the Family link. Amanda simply flowed off the platform and into Sarek's grasp, ignoring Tradition and culture and possible recriminations. Sarek ignored Tradition too and gently but firmly hugged her back.

Spock ended the silence when McCoy started waving medical scanners about his person. "There is no need for that, Doctor. I am in good health."

"Hah! You're too God-damned skinny, same as you always are," replied McCoy loudly.

Amanda turned to intervene, and Sarek partially released her, which was fortunate because at that moment Ferris arrived in the room. Sarek withdrew from contact, distancing himself smoothly from his wife as if he had not just shamelessly indulged in some very unVulcan behaviour.

"Lady Amanda. What is the outcome of your discussion? Are they peaceful or do we have to fight?"

"Briefing Room One has been prepared and the other diplomatic personnel will have gathered there by now so that you can all hear Lady Amanda's report together." Kirk smiled gallantly at Amanda. "If I may have the privilege of escorting you, Ma'am?"

Amanda placed her hand on the proffered arm and allowed Kirk to escort her past Ferris who followed immediately, still asking questions that were totally ignored.

"The Commissioner is from England, isn't he?" Spock asked Kyle.

"Yes, sir"

"I think that we are about to give him the opportunity to live up to the reputation his namesake created," announced Spock cryptically.

"His namesake?" asked McCoy.

"Yes. His name is Charles Darwin Ferris," explained Spock.

McCoy and Kyle looked blankly at each other as Spock sneaked a glance at Sarek, who was eyeing his son with growing suspicion.

"Explain," demanded Sarek when it became apparent that neither of the Humans would ask for the explanation.

"Darwin."

Pause.

"Elocution."

Pause.

"The Origin of the Speeches."

Kyle and McCoy broke up completely and Spock placidly left the room. Sarek caught up with him in three steps.

"Why did you do that?"

Spock stopped and faced his father, his hands clasped behind his back.

"It is my duty."

"What logical explanation can make the repeating of an ancient pun your duty?"

"You are no doubt aware of the deleterious effect that Commissioner Ferris has on the personnel of any ship on which he travels?"

Sarek thought of the recent session on the bridge of Enterprise with all the officers and crew listening avidly to his dry recitation of some of the deleterious effects. "Yes?"

"Commissioner Ferris is about to learn some facts which will not improve his temper, so I am attempting to 'defuse' the situation, before any of the crew lose their tempers with him."

"'Defuse' the situation? Kyle and McCoy will not be able to resist the temptation of repeating what you said."

"That is precisely why I spoke in their presence."

"Explain."

"The pun is an ancient one, but it is highly repeatable and very memorable. It will be spread throughout Enterprise, and the reaction to it will be the same as the one that you just witnessed. The next time that Commissioner Ferris detains a captive audience with one of his discourses they will know of the pun, and they will bear his pontificating with greater tolerance. I have a duty to this ship and its crew to prevent any occurrences of incidents which could reflect adversely on Starfleet. Hitting a Commissioner would have seriously adverse consequences."

"Do you think that it will end here?"

"No. It will be spread beyond Enterprise. I suspect that it will travel ahead of the Commissioner wherever he goes."

"And what do you think will happen when Ferris finds out about the pun?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"He will doubtless become... vexed."

"That is one way of describing his probable reaction. He will attempt to trace the source of the pun. He will eventually trace it back to you."

"I think not."

"No?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because he will not believe that I said anything of the sort."

"You are most confident of that."

"Certainly."

"Explain."

"You forget, father. I am a Vulcan. And Vulcans do not have a sense of humour. Do we?"

He stood, hands still clasped behind him, rocking slightly as his face softened, showing openly his amusement, daring his father to share it with him.

Sarek thought of all the years now lost to him; 18 spent in the rigid imposition of Vulcan discipline and 18 more in the equally rigid silence that he had imposed after Spock had left for the stars. He thought of the few short weeks at Babel, the companionship that was still possible between them, and he joyously abandoned Vulcan Tradition to its lonely fate.

For the first time Sarek directed the secret smile of a proud Vulcan father at his son. "Ah. Silly me. How could I have forgotten?"

